Legends and Legacies Book Chapters

10-1-2008

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Vivian spoke at a 2007 reception honoring her for becoming the first African-American woman promoted to professor of anesthesiology and pain medicine at M. D. Anderson.

In a 2004 family photo, Vivian holds son Troy while husband Henry Porche stands between son Henry III and daughter Bobbi.

Vivian’s parents, LaFrance and Bobby Harris, posed at a family member’s wedding in 2007.
always dreamed of being a doctor, wife and mother but never imagined how difficult it would be to play these roles simultaneously. I had imagined myself living a June Cleaver-esque life, with spotless, well-behaved children who waited patiently at the breakfast table while I leisurely prepared the food. My ideal husband would also be at the table, reading the paper and giving sage advice to our inquisitive, charming children. After work, I would come home and happily greet the children before preparing dinner. After dinner, my husband and I would help the kids — who, of course, would be eager to learn and very smart — with their homework. At bedtime, the kids would snuggle into their beds, eagerly awaiting a story and a song that I would sing, sounding like Julie Andrews. After the kids fell asleep, I would have a stimulating conversation with my husband about world events before retiring for the night.

That scenario is truly a beautiful dream, but my reality is much different. On a typical morning, I am already on my way to work when the kids wake up. The kids get up, get dressed and eat a breakfast prepared by the nanny, who takes them to school. The nanny then cleans, shops, starts dinner and picks up the kids from school. By the time I come home 10 to 12 hours later, everyone is tired and irritable, and those charming children are nowhere to be found. Instead, I have three little people who do not want to do their homework and do not want to go to bed but do want to watch television. By the time they are in bed, it is too late for a story, and I am too exhausted to sing. My husband has arrived during this time, also wanting attention but not receiving any. Our conversation is short and mundane before we fall into bed. The weekends I am on call are not much better — actually, they are somewhat worse, since my nanny does not work weekends.

But before you feel too sorry for me, let me state that I love my life! I might not be living the dream from my childhood, but I am living a dream. I am married to my high school sweetheart, have three wonderful, brilliant children, and have a successful career. How did I get here, you ask? Well, in Langston Hughes’ words, “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” I have tripped, stumbled and fallen down while still “a-climbin’ on, and reachin’ landin’s, and turnin’ corners.” Seeing the success of my mother and grandmother, even as they juggled their careers and family, has kept me on track. Equally important has been my faith and my determination; I knew then, as I know now, that I can do all things with God’s help.

I am blessed to have two parents, LaFrance C. and Bobby W. Harris, and a set of grandparents, Joseph O. and Senora L. Williams, who earned college and postgraduate degrees. Growing up as an African-American female in a family where almost everyone had a professional degree helped me tremendously, even though I knew that this situation was not the norm. In my world, everyone went to college and women worked outside the
home. Men also worked outside the home, but that was expected. What was “unexpected” was how many jobs my own father held as we grew up. Recognizing that he had to transition from giving orders to taking orders in his second and third jobs so that he could support his family made him almost superhuman in my eyes. Unyielding determination and perseverance are two of the many qualities my father demonstrated time and time again that have helped shape and mold me. Perhaps his productivity is a result of his own rearing by a mother who also assiduously worked at keeping her family together. Thus, when I was in junior high, at the beginning of desegregation, I was surprised to learn that many of my classmates had stay-at-home mothers. In my adolescent mind, I assumed that these women must have had some debilitating disease that prevented them from working. But with my mother and my friends’ mothers as role models, I grew up seeing women work outside of the home and have successful careers.

My parents were both elementary school principals. My younger brother and I each attended a school in which one of our parents worked. That meant that everyone in school — teachers and students — knew us. Our every move was monitored. When we got into trouble, we were reprimanded at school and at home. While we were growing up, education was highly valued, and my parents fostered a love of discovery and learning in my brother and me. They also showed me how a strong faith can help one overcome any obstacle. I know this is true because God has taken care of my family and me through many storms, trials and troubles.

I always knew that I wanted to be a doctor, as I enjoy being an agent of change and helping others to be their best. I thought I wanted to be a cardiovascular surgeon until high school, when I had the opportunity to observe an open-heart surgery being performed. While watching, I saw that the anesthesiologist was an expectant mother and thought, “Hey, here’s somebody who really is doing it all — being a doctor, a wife and a mother.” (Of course, when I was in high school, I thought that anyone who was pregnant had to be married.) I began to realize that there were more possibilities, other than being a surgeon, than I had imagined!

College was fun. I studied, pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, dated and studied some more. I enjoyed most of my classes, volunteered at a hospital and was chairman of the African-American Culture Committee, and I did well in all of these activities. I also endured a class in which the professor actually taught that African-Americans are genetically inferior to whites. I may have had to listen to all of this, but I refused to receive any of what he said. I chose not to argue with him because I knew that I would not win. He would only lower my grade, which would give me a lower grade-point average that could possibly prevent me from entering medical school. This was a very deliberate decision — I knew what I wanted to do, and I
decided to keep my eye on the prize.

Deciding on which medical school to attend was an easy choice for me. I wanted to stay close to home, and, fortunately, I had many schools to choose from. I applied to most of the schools in Texas, and, thankfully, was accepted to them all. I chose The University of Texas Medical School at Houston not only because of its proximity but also because of the wonderful opportunity for learning and discovery within the Texas Medical Center hospitals. I then began to consider how to achieve my additional goals of wife and mother and about how I could make my goals a reality. I methodically plotted out what I needed do first, then second, and so on, to achieve these goals. While planning, I realized two important things: First, I needed to have a boyfriend while in medical school, since I probably wouldn’t have time to date, and, second, I would have to have children during my residency so I could be more marketable as an attending physician. Thank you, God, for that insight! I dated the man who would become my husband during my last semester of college and through most of medical school. We were married in my last year of medical school.

When I was interviewing at different anesthesiology residency programs, I had an encounter with the chair of anesthesiology at a program primarily made up of white men. When I asked him why there were no African-Americans on staff or in the program, he answered, “There aren’t any qualified.” I proceeded to tell him, much to his chagrin, that I was qualified, and I began to recite my accomplishments. Needless to say, I did not match there. However, that conversation has continued to stimulate me to always “aim for the stars to land above the trees.” I matched with Baylor College of Medicine, my first choice for residency, and I was thrilled! Three years later, I had my first child during my residency. I decided to take three months of maternity leave before returning to work because I knew that those precious moments with my new baby could never be reclaimed.

Upon returning to work, I was thrust into the exciting world of cardiovascular surgery. As an anesthesiology resident, it was my duty to put the patients to sleep, keep them alive during the surgery, and wake them up at the end. I was still nursing my son when I returned to work, and I knew that I would need to use a breast pump during the day. I anticipated that my attending physician would be very understanding and allow me a little time during my breaks to pump before returning to the operating room. I was allowed to pump, but only when it was convenient for my attending, not when my breasts were full. This was not a problem until I had to stay in the operating room for a prolonged period because of a patient’s critical condition. When the patient’s condition improved, I was able to be relieved to pump, but only after watching my burgundy-colored scrubs turn pink because of all the milk that seeped through my shirt and after tolerating
verbal abuse, which included several expletives, from my attending. Before I left the room, I asked my attending if he had any more suggestions to help me become better at my work. Well, that made him even angrier, and I was promptly dismissed to go on break. (During my career, this was one of many instances of enduring verbal abuse that included the use of the “n” word.) But I knew that whatever he or anyone else said to me was not going to deter me; I knew I was put in that place by a higher power. The lesson I learned that day was to keep a cool head when there is chaos all around. This skill has served me well through the years.

Dr. Melba Swafford, who was an attending physician during my cardiovascular rotation, was helpful then and continues to mentor and support me now. She was the only African-American anesthesiologist I saw during my residency and both of my fellowships. She was also the first African-American in her department. Melba may not be the head of a department or someone very famous, but her knowledge, dedication, expertise and compassion combined with her calm demeanor have shown me how to handle difficult situations. She taught me how to assert myself with quiet authority and dignity and made sure that I dotted my I’s and crossed my T’s! She encouraged me then and encourages me now to always be better than the rest and to never let them see you sweat.

I interviewed for my first job at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center while I was very pregnant with my second child. It was obvious when I met with my potential chairman that he was hesitant to hire his first female anesthesiologist— and one with two small children, at that. I fervently sold myself by reiterating that I was settled in my marriage and settled in my family, that I would not have any more children, that there was no need to worry about my going on maternity leave, and that besides we already had a nanny who would help with the kids. I left that meeting with a signed contract! Lesson learned from this: Have a plan and a back-up plan of action.

My first office mate arrived a few months after I started working. She had only been in practice a few years before coming to the institution. We became very friendly, especially since we both came from similar backgrounds: her parents, too, were educators; she had married her high school sweetheart, just as I had done; and she had two small children of her own. One day, she and I began to talk about our hopes and dreams, our families, and the moral influences of our upbringing. Then, a light bulb went off for my Caucasian friend. I will never forget how sincerely, and with a newfound realization, she said to me, “You people are just like us!” She then told me that her views of African-Americans had been shaped by negative images on television and that she had not personally known anyone like me. From then on and to this day, we have built a lasting friendship based on mutual respect, admiration and similarities.
One other colleague, an older white man, also changed his opinion of me after working and interacting with me. Before I even entered the operating room, I had been told that one of the men on staff was not happy that I was hired. “They hired another woman,” he complained, “and this one has little kids. She will never be at work.” Well, I heard that and I knew he probably voiced the opinion of many others who were not quite so outspoken. I was very pleased when he told me, after I had worked solidly for one year without ever calling in sick, that he was “pleasantly surprised at my behavior and work ethic.” That conversation sparked other conversations, which led to a great camaraderie between us. Our positive interactions showed other colleagues that I had truly been “accepted” into the group. This acceptance led to many collaborations with other colleagues, which ultimately helped me progress from assistant professor to associate professor, and, most recently, to full professor.

I realized that, although they may not always look like you, supportive people can help you progress and possibly become role models. That is a key message that I would like to offer. We must elicit the assistance of the people who can help us, regardless of any differences. We need to find the people with whom we are friendly or with whom we have some sort of bond, but, most important, we must find those whom we want to emulate. We must talk with them and express to them the similarities we share so that in mentoring us they will focus on those similarities and not on what is different.

I enjoy my career, and I enjoy my family, but I cannot give 100 percent of me to them both simultaneously. I try to schedule time off from work so I can chaperone a field trip or participate in another activity with my children. I take time to attend their games and talk with their teachers. The time I spend with my family is limited but precious, so I make sure that the time is quality and golden. When there are extra demands at work, I spend more time in the office or in the operating room. To make deadlines, I push the date up to make sure that last-minute distractions do not become derailments. And, when I go home, I leave the office at the office. Finally, I forgive myself when things do not happen as I expect they should. I take my lemons and make lemonade.

Outwardly, some would say that I am successful. How do I define success? Booker T. Washington said it best: “Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome.” I am sure that overcoming obstacles is not unique to African-Americans or to women. In fact, for me, striving to overcome obstacles has strengthened my character and resolve. When I fall, I pick myself up and dust myself off, for as Maya Angelou says, “I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise, I rise, I rise.”

Mae Jemison, the first female African-American astronaut, dared to
dream of flying into space even when she did not see any other astronauts who were African-American women. Oprah Winfrey dared to become a media mogul by breaking new ground and creating “an unparalleled connection with people around the world.” Shirley Jackson, the 18th president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and, according to Time Magazine, “perhaps the ultimate role model for women in science,” dared to dream of becoming a physicist. And Vivian Porche dared to become the first African-American female professor in M. D. Anderson’s history. I believe the two things we all have in common (besides, of course, our ethnicity and gender) are our pursuit of excellence and our perseverance. With God’s help, we can all achieve our most lofty dreams.