

Answering the Call: No Disconnects

How a Smith College Ph.D. Student Followed Iconic Footprints to Clark Atlanta University

ATLANTA (FEB. 28, 2017)--Ronjonette N. Harrison, LCSW, knows that severe childhood trauma can imprison its victims. She also knows that healing, with appropriate treatment and support, is fully possible. That reality is much more than a career goal for the Smith College doctoral student, presently interning as a doctoral research assistant in Clark Atlanta University's Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work. She has dedicated all of her energies to addressing issues of interpersonal trauma, mental health challenges and the adverse effects of criminal justice involvement for youth and women of color.

"I consider myself an advocate, a voice for individuals and families grappling with abuse, victimization and marginalization," she says.

Harrison, who earned the bachelor's degree in social work at State University College at Buffalo and the master of social welfare degree at State University of New York at Stony Brook, is in the final phases of completing the Ph.D. in social work at the prestigious Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Mass. Her desire to intern at CAU is, perhaps, associated with an earlier "disconnect" that shaped her perspectives on social work education.

"I entered undergraduate school with little support, resources or direction," she recalls. I became aware of the social work profession while taking an elective course, "Social Work with Minority Families." It sparked an intense range of emotions, and my passion for the field was instant and all-consuming. I knew this was my calling." But a young Harrison faced one glaring hurdle. "Although my teachers were talented and committed to the student body," she continued, "there was a disconnect because faculty often were not representative of the client [minority] population. Their theoretical perspectives significantly differed from my experiences and those in my community."

That episode stuck with Harrison over the past 15 years. So, when time to satisfy Smith College's doctoral research internship requirement, she knew she wanted to do so on an HBCU campus. "As a social worker, you can't stand in footsteps any more resonant than W.E. B. Du Bois and Whitney M. Young Jr.," Harrison says. "And both sets of iconic footprints lead you to Clark Atlanta University. W.E.B. Du Bois founded contemporary sociology on *this* campus, and activist and advocate Whitney M. Young Jr. was the School of Social Work's first dean. They are legends for anyone in this field, regardless of one's race. CAU is 'ground zero' for anyone who is serious about shaping the future of social work."

But is it necessary for an African-American to connect with other minority clients? And does legacy translate into policymaking, Harrison's ultimate goal? Harrison says that not to immerse herself in the client population would be irresponsible. "African Americans are not a monolith. Clark Atlanta provides an opportunity, and central proximity to the metro-Atlanta community, for me to advance my own research interests--exploring associations between betrayal trauma and criminal pathways of incarcerated women of color--immersed in diverse client subpopulations that have been or will be directly or indirectly affected by this issue based upon a number of factors, age, social identity and economics among them." She also noted that while CAU's social work legacy is irreproachable, the value proposition that led her to the program is the School's multiple ties to the policymaking arena. "There is a pervasive, infectious sense of activism, of change agency here that challenges and fuels my own aspirations."

(more)

Clark Atlanta University is a private, coeducational four-year university located in the historic heart of Atlanta, Ga. It is designated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a Doctoral-High Research Activity University. Our 3,884 students are engaged in 38 areas of study in our four schools: Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Education and the Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work. National business and consumer publications rank Clark Atlanta high among the best institutions in American higher education. Clark Atlanta University is accredited to award the Bachelor's, Master's, Specialist and Doctoral degrees by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1866 Southern Lane, Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097; Telephone 404-679-4501).

For more information, call 404-880-8000 or go to www.cau.edu.

Harrison's time at CAU isn't governed by self-interest. The published author, who is simultaneously completing a clinical internship at neighboring Spelman College Counseling Services, also is working with CAU Professor Joi G. Showell, Ph.D., to evaluate the licensure test results of the Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work's MSW students, providing data that better allows school faculty and staff to facilitate licensure preparedness among graduates. She also looks forward to contributing to research efforts among other faculty and staff.

Whitney M. Young, Jr., School of Social Work Dean Jenny L. Jones, Ph.D., says what Harrison brings to the program affirms the legendary foundation upon which the School's national reputation is anchored. "What Ronjonette brings to the program reaffirms the character of our School and honors the standards of excellence set by our forebears, W. E. B. Du Bois and Whitney M. Young Jr.: a strong academic pedigree, an appreciation for innovative research and critical analysis, and a passion for transformative policymaking that creates meaningful change."

It appears that Harrison has ruled out the possibility of another disconnect. The CAU doctoral research assistant also has been called to enliven CAU's motto, "A Culture for Service."

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