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Makyla Williamson

Harding University, mwilliamson@harding.edu

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CHRISTINE DARDEN: HIDDEN NO LONGER

By Makyra Williamson

Dr. Christine Darden, NASA mathematician, overcomer, and education reform advocate, visited Harding University in February to share her story. Besides her successful career at NASA, Darden's claim to fame is the book *Hidden Figures: The Untold True Story of the Black Women who Helped Win the Space Race*. It was popularized by the 2016 movie, the plot of which circulates around the three women who came before Christine Darden: Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson. Dorothy Vaughan started at NASA (then NACA) in 1943. Mary Jackson and Katherine Johnson began working there in 1951 and 1953, respectively. They paved the way for Darden's career at NASA, which began in 1967, two years before the moon landing. Christine Darden's career was built "On Their Shoulders," as she titled her speech at Harding.

Dr. Darden got her undergraduate degree in mathematics at Hampton Institute and went on to teach high school math for a couple of years before continuing her education with an M.S. at Virginia State and eventually earning a PhD in engineering from George Washington University. Dr. Darden began working at NASA in 1967 as a data analyst, also known as a "computer." While working there, Darden noticed that men were funneled into engineering jobs while women were sent into computing. Not satisfied to stand by, Darden went over her supervisor's head to the director to ask why this was happening. The risk paid off, and Darden was transferred to engineering, where she had a lengthy career working on the sonic boom project. NASA has awarded her two medals in recognition of her accomplishments, and she has also received the Women in STEM Lifetime Achievements Award.

Even in retirement, Darden is a woman on a mission. She speaks passionately about education reform, a topic near and dear to her heart. Her undergraduate degree is in math education, and Darden spent a few

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years teaching high school math. And although she may have stopped teaching, Darden has never stopped being an educator.

During her career, Darden worked with the National Technical Association, providing SAT tutoring, math contests, technical talk competitions, and more. Darden is especially proud of the technical talk experience the program provided. When she found herself giving presentations about the sonic boom project at NASA, Darden started doing Toastmasters to bolster her public speaking skills. It prepared her for answering questions, “almost like the politicians.” In addition, Darden has used her speaking experience to educate students about career opportunities at NASA, and she uses her platform today to call for educational reform as she shares her journey.

Why is Darden so passionate about education? Part of the answer lies in her own academic path. One of the obstacles she faced was a lack of access to upper level math classes in high school. Darden decided she wanted to be a mathematician, but she had to play a lot of catch-up in college. One semester, she took two advanced math classes during the same period: she attended Advanced Calculus and just read for the other class, only going in on test days. Her diligence paid off.

Another reason Darden is passionate about education is because she is passionate about our country. She believes that healthy democracy rests on a healthy educational system; she wants well-educated citizens. In addition, Darden is concerned that the United States isn't keeping up with the rest of the world, especially considering the implications of asteroid mining and the technological advances being made by other countries. Darden believes that “it is important for our young people and our young minds to be in those areas [STEM] and develop.” She mourns the fact that the United States is outsourcing technological jobs, asking students, “Are you all saying that those students are smarter than you are?” Darden believes that students have to challenge themselves in their coursework in order to grow intellectually. She even has a formula for success: P⁴. It stands for perceive, plan, prepare, persist. It's the path that Darden followed in her own career, and the one she recommends to

students. She perceived herself as a mathematician, planned and prepared for her career, and persisted until she succeeded.

So, what exactly needs to change? Darden points to underpaid and undervalued teachers and calls for the public to rise up in support for teachers and the educational system. And rather than scripted teaching, she believes that teachers should incorporate real-life application into the classroom. That's what helped Darden fall in love with math, and she wants children today to have that same opportunity. However, to do that, we need to keep quality teachers in the classroom. Darden believes the system needs to be changed so that it attracts high caliber teachers. Finally, Darden wants parents to invest in their children's education and calls for "the union of parents" to rise up. Teachers need support, and "it's going to take the country to do that." How can we help the next generation stand on our shoulders?