

# Celebrating Courage & Charting the Future

## Commemorating 50 Years of Black Women at Converse

Fifty years ago this fall, Freida Rogers Byrd and Margaret Jones Swindler became the first Black students to enroll at Converse College. In celebration of this milestone, we reflect on our heritage and explore the work still ahead of us with a year-long series, *Celebrating Courage & Charting the Future: Commemorating 50 Years of Black Women at Converse*.

The series began last February with a panel of distinguished alumnae sharing their experiences. It continues through the 2018-2019 year with feature stories highlighting individual alumnae. On September 21, we will commemorate the anniversary during Opening Convocation, lunch and an afternoon of special topic discussions. Finally, in the spring of 2019, the series will culminate with an exhibition highlighting Converse's history of African American students developed by students of Dr. Angela Elder as part of a class research project.



▲ **Alumnae Panelists** (from left to right)

**Joy Danielle Stoney '00**  
Attorney and Owner, Stoney Law Firm LLC

**Stinson Woodward Ferguson '07**  
Associate Attorney with Southern Environmental Law Center and Director of Organizational Development for J.W. Woodward Funeral Home Inc.

**The Honorable Deadra L. Jefferson '85**  
Circuit Judge, South Carolina 9th Judicial Circuit

**Phyllis Perrin Harris '82**  
Senior Vice President and General Counsel Legal Operations, Walmart Stores Inc.

**Dr. Kay E. Woodward**  
President, J.W. Woodward Funeral Home Inc. Converse's first Black faculty member

**Candy Moore '93**  
Senior Vice President, Community Development Manager Southeast Region, Wells Fargo

**Dawn Davis Deck '99**  
Director of Planned Giving, ETV Endowment of SC Inc.

**Dr. Jayne Stewart Reuben '85**  
Associate Professor, Texas A&M University, College of Dentistry

Last February, nearly 100 Black alumnae returned home to Converse for an afternoon of fellowship over lunch, a panel discussion with distinguished alumnae, and a reception hosted by Converse students.

Seven Black alumnae and Converse's first Black faculty member gathered with President Krista Newkirk in front of a packed house in Montgomery Student Center. They discussed their Converse experiences, creating a culture that embraces diversity, how they overcome hurdles in their professional lives, the impact of mentors, and how we can strengthen the network between alumnae and students.

**JOIN US TO CELEBRATE at Opening Convocation September 21, 2018**

- Procession of Black alumnae
- Gospel Choir performance
- Lunch with the Converse community
- Special topic breakout discussions
- Reservations requested

Learn more about the 50th Celebration Series and register your participation at [www.converse.edu/CelebratingCourage](http://www.converse.edu/CelebratingCourage)

**COMMEMORATING 50 YEARS OF BLACK WOMEN AT CONVERSE 1968-2018**



**A Tribute to Our Trailblazers**

We would not be telling this story today were it not for the courage of our first two students, Freida Rogers Byrd and Margaret Jones Swindler, to come forward and share their stories. They blazed a trail at Converse that at times, I'm sure, was not easy. Their stories are part of a long history of Converse and a variety of perspectives and experiences by our Black and minority students.

**President Newkirk**

**On Choosing Converse**

We set out one Saturday to visit several schools. When I got to campus, I stood on back campus and looked at my Daddy and said 'This is where I belong. We don't need to visit anywhere else.' And he looked at me like, 'My child with no life experience has visited ONE college....,' but I said 'I know this, trust me. I feel it - this is where I belong.' I think a lot of people had this experience.

**Deadra Jefferson**

I attended an African American high school in Atlanta. I did not go to school with Caucasians the entire time I attended school, from kindergarten until 12th grade, so when I arrived at Converse this was like a different universe for me, to be quite candid. Talk about transforming my mind and making me think differently — one of the things I learned at Converse is to be fearless and to be confident. I felt like I could compete with anyone, and I did compete with anyone.

**Phyllis Harris**

## Mentorship Experiences and Advice

I was Converse's first black faculty member...The students who were here in the early and mid '70s were exceptional students. It was a two-way mentorship. I felt I served as a mentor to students - not only black students but all students - and I feel students helped me in my growth process. It was a very exciting time.

**Kay Woodward**

I created a Board of Advisors. This is a group of individuals I trust and love... who know my character...It took me years to assemble my personal board of advisors, and they help me when I make life decisions about my career or something personal. I think having a mentor and mentee relationship is so important.

**Candy Moore**

Eleanor Roosevelt said 'Learn from the mistakes of others. You can never live long enough to make them all yourself.' It is essential to have a mentor. Someone who has already traveled your road and made the mistakes. As children of the '60s, our mothers taught us that you become better from a thing, not bitter...Even though you experience hard things you know you come out of it for the better. We all need a confessor who hears without judgment who can encourage us to know that we will overcome the rough patches of the journey. Nothing in life worth having is ever going to be easy.

**Deadra Jefferson**

## Pivotal Moments When Barriers Were Broken

I started in 1996 and that was the year that we had 33 black female students. It was the largest in the College's history...but by the end of that first year, 15 were gone... One of my good friends was from the inner city of Detroit and that was a culture shock to come to Spartanburg, SC... There were some racial tensions that occurred during that time, and I think now we're a lot more culturally sensitive.

**Joy Stoney**

In the 1980s we were still seeing some of the last public elements of segregation. I remember one of the students...came to us and said 'I'm getting married and I want you to come to my wedding, but you can't come to the reception because it is at a whites only country club...I remember us looking at one another and telling her..."We just don't feel comfortable with that."

**Jayne Reuben**

In 1995, when I came to Converse it was at the time when the first female was trying to be accepted into The Citadel...In response to this challenging time, Converse began the South Carolina Institute of Leadership for Women (SCIL); a military leadership program for women. (The issue) wasn't about race but it was about women and the rights of women...That stood out to me during my years here.

**Dawn Deck**

## Pivotal Moments (cont.)

To me the biggest breakdown of the racial barrier was when we came back to school in 1980 and... there were 21-22 black women in the incoming class, that's when I felt like things had really changed... In reflection, and I know the College has changed significantly in this regard, in many respects perhaps the infrastructure was not in place because we lost quite a few of those women... If I could go back in time, there were women that I wish we had helped a bit more.

**Phyllis Harris**



## Creating Unity in Our Communities

Converse was a wonderfully secure environment in which to grow and to become. People always ask me what it's like to be a black judge and I say maybe the better question is what is it like being a female judge, because being a woman always matters, no matter what environment you are in. As women, we have to remember the importance of complimenting one another, supporting one another, how to push one another - we should always know the importance of standing on one another's shoulders.

**Deadra Jefferson**

I pledged the citywide chapter of Delta Sigma Theta at Converse with women from Wofford and Limestone and USC Spartanburg. Of course, we don't have these citywide chapters anymore, but at the end of the day it was about how to have connectivity as a family, and for me personally it meant a lot to have that experience. Everything is about culture and about feeling accepted.

**Phyllis Harris**

We shouldn't campaign so much on social media about our grievances. Instead, go to individuals and have a conversation to confront issues head on. We must intentionally reach beyond what we know to be comfortable and learn something different about others who don't look like us.

**Dawn Deck**



### Hopes for Converse's Future and for Our Students

My hope for Converse is that it is a thriving institution with wonderful women and is exclusively a women's college 100 years from now. Being on the Board has helped me to gain a better appreciation for this college community and to see what it really takes to make this the special place that it is. It takes all of us having a love for the College, and it is wonderful to see so many women come back. But we not only have to come back, we also have to give back.

**Phyllis Harris**

I love looking in the audience and seeing that Converse women do not all look alike, sound alike, care about the same things, believe the same things, or want the same things. My hope is that what binds us and distinguishes us is that we share a commitment to excellence and we will all be willing to speak up when something wrong or inappropriate is going on, even when doing so is not comfortable.

**Stinson Ferguson**

My hope for Converse is that it continues to be a college that cares about her students. My mother was a widow and she passed away my sophomore year. The faculty here took care of me... Students, you are going to have adversity and you may not come here under the best circumstances, but what you leave with is what you take with you. Converse will be here for you and we want you to be here for Converse.

**Jayne Reuben**

The one thing I regret is taking for granted the relationships I formed at Converse, believing they were going to last forever. You have to put forth effort to maintain relationships...as my pastor says, relationships are the currency of Heaven. Stay in touch with each other and support each other.

**Joy Stoney**

From a faculty perspective, it is my wish for Converse to be much more diverse in terms of faculty representation....I encourage Converse to be very intentional about diversity of faculty and staff, and I encourage quality additions of faculty who are diverse.

**Kay Woodward**

I ask that we keep the momentum going that we have here today...Converse molded me and provided my foundation from a professional perspective...Please consider that in your journey in being reconnected to Converse.

**Candy Moore**

### In Closing

When I talked to these women about their Converse experience, not all of their stories were positive...but they came back and they led and they committed themselves to making things better when it would have been easy to walk away. We are all striving for this common vision that you expressed, and that means having the hard conversations.

**President Newkirk**

### Reflections After the Event

The turnout for the event was not purely other women of color - not even purely other women. The Chamber President was there. President Newkirk's husband was there. Trustees were there. Professors were there. People I served with on the Alumnae Board were there. Current students were there. People of all shades, ages, and styles were present and engaged. The energy was fantastic. This is a community-wide celebration, not just a celebration for women of color.

**Stinson Ferguson**



One Converse family had five alumnae members present for the February event! From left: Patricia Perry Beason '79, Wanda McDowell Moore '91, Wilesha Davis Wright '01, Sandra Beason Watson '79, Dawn Davis Deck '99