

# The Trinidad Guardian

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## Dr Shireen Lewis

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### By Laura Dowrich-Phillips

Obtaining a doctorate is different from getting a bachelor's or masters degree. For one thing, the duration of time it takes to get a doctorate is longer, seven to ten years on average.

Then there's the research, which, depending on the subject of study, may require the doctoral student to travel extensively.

Once the research is done, there's a dissertation to write and there, said Dr Shireen Lewis, is where many people lose direction.

Holder of a PhD in French Literature from Duke University, Lewis, 46, knows firsthand how trying the process can be for a doctoral student.

"Nobody tells you what it takes to do a PhD. Here I was, just returned from doing research in Paris and Senegal and I am feeling isolated, lonely and disconnected. There was very little direction from my professors," she said.

Realising there may be other women of colour who were experiencing the same feelings with their studies, Lewis reached out to them and SisterMentors was born.

An organisation which provides space where coloured female doctoral candidates can come together and help each other complete their doctoral studies, SisterMentors started out in 1997 as a study group with four women in a space donated by Sisterspace and Books, a bookstore.

Today, the organisation has grown and has thus far has helped 25 women

complete their studies.

"It took off like it had a life of its own," said Lewis, who is currently on vacation in Trinidad and Tobago, her first visit in 17 years.

"I hadn't done the research, but women kept coming and I wanted to know why. The research showed that 50 per cent of people drop out of doctoral programmes and support is one of the ways to fight that," she said. "We started in September 1997 and six months after that, the first woman graduated."

Each graduation, Lewis explained, is accompanied by a big celebration with roses and a Waterman's fountain pen with the person's name and new title, given as gifts.

Open to all women of colour, that is, all Asians, Latinos, Afro-Americans, Native Americans and immigrants of colour, SisterMentors assists women by creating a forum where they can discuss the challenges they are experiencing with their studies.

"In 2003, out of 50.6 per cent of women doctorates, only 10.6 per cent went to women of colour — African American, Latina, Asian American and Native American combined," said Lewis, quoting from statistics published in the SisterMentors newsletter.

Based in Washington, DC, where Lewis now lives, SisterMentors meets once every three weeks. While the women are encouraged at the beginning of the year to set long-term goals, usually for a six-month duration, they use the meetings to set short-term goals.

"So if you say by the end of June, I want to write two chapters of my dissertation, every three weeks, you set a new goal to help you realise that," explained Lewis. "You come to the meetings and say, 'I want to write five pages and read two books.' That's a promise you are making to the women in your group. Outside the meetings, people reach out to each other via e-mails or private meetings."

Acknowledging that such fora could open the door for the exposure of more personal issues, Lewis said at times women have sobbed uncontrollably at sessions.

"There have been discussions about unsupportive professors and personal stuff. We give comfort and advice."

Stating that the waiting list for membership to SisterMentors is long, Lewis said they are only interested in women who are serious and committed.

"You have to understand our mission and you must understand you have to give back and that means giving up your time," she said.

Giving back in SisterMentors means mentoring young girls of colour to ensure they at least get a college education.

In 2001, the organisation expanded to include mentoring.

"That came because one of the women did her work on girls' education in Africa and she wanted us to focus on girls of colour in America.

We want to encourage girls who don't have much opportunities, girls who have no family that went to college and girls who qualify for free meals in school because their families are poor," Lewis said, adding that the first

group of girls mentored by SisterMentors will enter college in 2007.

"The reason so few non-white women were doing PhDs is because so few of us were getting through the pipeline. The pipeline issue wasn't being addressed. You have drop-outs happening along the way, girls getting pregnant, losing interest."

Stating that she was the first black person to get a PhD in French at Duke University in 1998, Lewis said universities in the US generally do not have good track records of getting women of colour into PhD programmes.

While agreeing that many people only see PhDs as good for lecturing and therein may lie the turn off, Lewis said there are very few jobs for PhDs at university levels now. As such, the job crisis is forcing the experts to find ways to make PhD holders useful to society at large.

"Some go on to work at non-profit organisations, or with government or the political think-tanks," she said.

While there are no chapters of SisterMentors outside DC, Lewis said she may consider starting one in T&T if there is interest and support.

SisterMentors functions under the umbrella of Eduseed, a non-profit organisation of which Lewis is the executive director.

Eduseed, she said, currently has plans to start a programme teaching children of colour how to be media savvy by understanding the media, the messages it puts out and how to critically analyse it.

#### **About Shireen Lewis**

Born in Pepper Village, Fyzabad, South Trinidad, Lewis attended the Pepper Village Government school and later the Palo Seco Secondary school. With only four O'Levels, she found it difficult to get into an A'Level programme and was eventually admitted to the Polytechnic School in St James where she did French and Spanish.

After A'Levels, Lewis taught at Holy Faith Convent, Penal, then a private school, before migrating to the US with her sisters in 1981.

She applied and was accepted to Douglass College, an all-girls' campus of Rutgers University, where she studied French and Spanish. As part of the programme, she spent a year in France, dividing her time between Tours and Paris, where she was discouraged by a professor to pursue her dream of doing a PhD. Instead, he convinced her to do law, which she did at the University of Virginia.

Following law school, Lewis practised law in New York City but found herself longing to follow her dream of doing a PhD. She applied to Duke University and did her degree in French Literature with a focus on Francophone West African and Caribbean literature.

Her dissertation gave birth to a newly released book, *Race, Culture and Identity: Francophone West African and Caribbean Literature and Theory from Negritude to Creolite*, published by Lexington Books, a division of Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

The book will be available in Politics and Prose in Washington, DC and two bookstores in Paris. Lewis is scheduled to visit the city in October for a reading.

Lewis is also a columnist for Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education. In

addition to her many activities, she has helped raise funds for the first school in Tibet which promotes education for girls and is the past co-president of the Washington DC branch of the American Association of University Women.

On the Net: [www.sistermentors.org](http://www.sistermentors.org) and [www.eduseed.org](http://www.eduseed.org)

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