

# FOCUS

News for and about Rutgers faculty, students, and staff

## News

# Helping Women of Color Stay on Course for Doctoral Degrees

**A support group founded by a Douglass College graduate has helped more than 30 women finish their dissertations.**

By Fredda Sacharow



Shireen Lewis is pictured in an advertorial sponsored by Pine-Sol in the January 2010 issue of Essence Magazine.

Its name defines its mission: SisterMentors, the vision of a Rutgers graduate, provides emotional support and encouragement for women of color who dream of earning their doctoral degrees.

Indeed, a total of 34 veteran and newly minted Ph.D.s credit SisterMentors with helping them finish their dissertations in American studies, mathematics, psychology, sociology, and other fields.

Shireen K. Lewis, the creative force behind the project, was hailed by *Ebony Magazine* last year as an “Unsung Hero” making a difference for children, schools, and communities. The honor is one of many for the Trinidad and Tobago native, whose own village had no elementary school initially, and whose father, working an oil rig, could only dream of a college education.

The numbers driving SisterMentors are stark, Lewis says. “When you look at the research, 50 to 60 percent of people who start their doctorate drop out, and the anecdotal evidence says that number is even higher for people of color,” she notes, citing a dearth of funding and lack of proper guidance by advisors as prime reasons even highly qualified candidates wind up with ABD status: All But Dissertation.

Lewis might easily have been one of them.

Years and miles from her childhood home in Pepper Village, Fyzabad, in Trinidad, Lewis retains the soft cadences of the southern Caribbean as she tells of growing up in the 1960s in her newly independent nation, governed by a prime minister -- the fledgling democracy's first -- with a Ph.D. from Oxford.

"One of the things that really influenced my parents was that this man was a scholar, a historian, as well as a politician," she recalls. "He talked a lot about educating his people, and he was a role model himself for many of us."

After graduating from Douglass College with a bachelor's degree in French and Spanish in 1986, the former high school teacher earned a law degree from the University of Virginia while pursuing her doctorate in French. Two years of litigating at a Manhattan law firm convinced Lewis her future belonged in the world of academia, so it was on to Duke University to finish up that Ph.D.

The loneliness and isolation she encountered while grappling with her dissertation -- "Race, Culture and Identity: Francophone West African and Caribbean Literature and Theory from Négritude to Créolité" -- were debilitating. Reasoning that others were laboring alone in libraries and offices, Lewis had an epiphany: Why not serve as de facto family for each other while providing support and encouragement?

SisterMentors was born more than a dozen years ago in a Washington D.C. bookstore owned by two African-American women who, at Lewis's request, reached out to customers to comprise the first group. Eight pioneers hammered out a set of guidelines: Meeting every three weeks, they would establish goals such as writing 10 pages by the next session, or working out a particularly thorny problem with an advisor. They also would read each other's chapters, and offer feedback across their disciplines.

It was a winning formula. All but one woman in that initial group completed and defended their dissertations, (The sole drop-out left her Ph.D. program when her mother was dying of cancer. Later, she would go on to earn a Fulbright, complete her advanced degree, and accept a teaching position at American University.)

A spirit of camaraderie develops as the participants nurture each other through the grueling process, Lewis observes, many of them working full time while raising families. Once each woman has that precious piece of paper in hand, the group holds a celebration, complete with singing, dancing, and gifts, to mark the milestone.

The organization also has a give-back component: Participants mentor young women of color coming up through elementary, middle, and high school.

Jessica Floyd, the first in her family to go away to college and the first to earn a doctorate, found SisterMentors a godsend. After graduating from Rutgers in 2003 with a bachelor's degree in psychology, she began her Psy.D. work at Rutgers' Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, but a move to Virginia to serve an internship at a Falls Church clinic left her floundering.

"When I was in New Jersey working on my data study, I had a pretty good support base from other students, but I didn't have people in the same boat as I was in Virginia," recalls Floyd. "Although I was close to completing my dissertation, working full time was making it difficult to stay motivated. Once I found SisterMentors, I knew I had the support and guidance I needed to push through."

Now a psychology associate at the Reginald S. Lourie Center for Infants and Young Children in Rockville, Maryland, Floyd works with victims of abuse and neglect.

SisterMentors is a project of EduSeed, a nonprofit promoting education among historically disadvantaged and underserved communities. Lewis's organization fields requests from all 50 states and an ever-increasing number of foreign countries.

In 2005, the Douglass Associate Alumnae honored Lewis as a Distinguished Alumna; later that year, she

received the Honorable Annice M. Wagner Pioneer Award from the Bar Association of the District of Columbia.