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Shireen Lewis, J.D, PhD Making a powerful difference

By Renee Cummings

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A bus rolled into Princeton University, NJ, a few months ago, from Washington DC, carrying the aspirations and ambitions of a new generation. It was filled with hope and powered with promise; a journey into the future; driven by a desire to change the destiny of girls who could have been left behind in life were it not for the brilliant intervention of one woman from Pepper Village, Fyzabad.

It was a road trip like no other; destined to change their lives. Waiting for them was Princeton's first female president, Shirley Tilghman, a renowned scientist and scholar; celebrated for her pioneering research in mammalian genetics. "To see themselves on a college campus makes a powerful difference for

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these girls," says Trinidadian, Dr Shireen Lewis, founder of SisterMentors; a mentorship programme started 13 years ago, for girls from underserved and underrepresented minority communities across the District of Columbia. They were also elated to meet Cornel West, one of the most respected voices on American culture and politics; author, actor, critic, civil rights activist, philosopher and professor in Princeton's department of African-American Studies. "He was scheduled to spend a half-hour with the girls but he spent an hour and half," she says, still amazed that the celebrity scholar stayed sixty minutes longer than planned. "Just to hear him; you should have seen their faces when he was speaking. These girls are from lower income homes and would have never been interested in college if they weren't being mentored."

She has a powerful mentorship story of her own and shares it with pride. "Even before I started this programme, I understood the importance of mentoring. Mentoring is key to profound change." She was eight and a student at Pepper Village Government School, when she met a 21 year-old teacher named Arrandora "Dora" Chase who sparked in her, a fiery brand of intellectual curiosity that continues to burn. "She took me under her wing and she pushed me to do things that I thought I couldn't do. Academically, I grew strong and confident." She acquired an inner strength that conquered all academic challenges in her quest for higher education; from Pepper Village Government to Palo Seco Secondary and then from Polytechnic in St James, to Douglass Women's College at Rutgers University, New Jersey, where she obtained a B.A. in French and Spanish. When she graduated, in '86, she entered law school and began working at a midtown Manhattan law firm. While pursuing her law degree, she also enrolled in a French Literature doctoral programme. She left her job to complete her doctorate at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; that's when she found out the hard way that America could be a very lonely place; particularly for a woman of colour in academia. Overcome by feelings of isolation, she left Duke and moved to DC with an unfinished dissertation.

"I started looking around for other women of colour who were working on their dissertation but it was difficult." Eventually, she found one from Howard University and another from the University of North Carolina and SisterMentors was born; affirming kinship and sisterhood among women of colour seeking academic excellence. It began as a gathering of doctoral students mentoring each other through the painstaking process but soon enough they extended their reach deep into minority communities to mentor others. "We were all successful with our doctorates so we wanted to give back because we realised so few girls of colour were being mentored and even fewer were pursuing doctorates. So we decided to feed the pipeline." Around the same time she received her PhD. in

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French Literature from Duke, she got her JD from the University of Virginia School of Law. Her effort, to assert a collective presence of black female intellectuals as an inspiration to others, has been so well received that she was recognised by the two leading black American publications, EBONY and ESSENCE; as a woman making a difference and changing the lives of other women. "Those honours felt great; very nice. When Ebony called me, I was sitting in my office working. I was so shocked when they said they were giving me an award for the work I was doing. I was very humbled."

She's no stranger to awards and accolades. For her intellectual leadership, the Bar Association of the District of Columbia presented her with a Pioneer Award, the National Association of Women Lawyers also recognised her contributions to community building with an award for being a role model for future generations. Douglass College, Rutgers University, honoured her as a distinguished alumnae and inducted her into the Douglass Society, the highest honour given to distinguished alumnae. Through SisterMentors, which falls under EduSeed, her umbrella non-profit organisation, she and a close network of "like minds" have mentored over 100 girls, ages 10 to 18, from socially challenged neighbourhoods with the desire to simply do better. When it comes to education in America, there's a racial subtext; exclusion at worst, neglect, at best. Her goal is to help women of colour overcome the limitations imposed by their skin colour because they most certainly have the brain power. "We follow them right through to college. They have monthly sessions with doctoral students, throughout the school year, annual college visits, and other activities. I only use professionals with a track record of success. I look for mentors with substance and not the isms and schisms."

Promoting equity in education" bridging the achievement gap for women of colour" is now her full-time job. She used to teach at several American universities. "Making school more meaningful, is the big challenge, in education, all over the world. We have to help children make that deep connection between school and how to lead meaningful lives." She was in Trinidad, recently for a few weeks, spending time with her primary school teacher and mentor who not so long ago retired as principal of Palo Seco Government School. "For young people all over, their sense of values are really changing. Technology is also changing, rapidly. It is all about instant gratification. They want it now and no one wants to work hard to achieve it. They want to have the future now, in the present; they don't know how to persevere." She offers a meaningful vocabulary that highlights a universal challenge for which she continues to mobilise support. Her work doesn't end in the United States; beyond borders, she's takes her mission to educate women; making doing well academically part of their culture. She has raised funds for the first school in one village in Tibet with the "unprecedented requirement that fifty percent of its students must be girls" and she continues to work with her long-time school friend, playwright Zeno Constance, to reduce the risk of teenage pregnancy among high school girls at Fyzabad Senior Secondary. She assisted him in securing funding from a New York foundation that supports international efforts to improve the lives of girls and women. "He used SisterMentors as a model for his own mentoring programme where sixth formers were mentoring girls in second and third form."

She is a keen observer of the local education system and affirms that it needs to be more relevant to the lives of our students. "I've been observing closely and trying to understand the problem. There needs to be more honest and direct conversations. As a people, we are often so brutally honest to each other but yet we cannot have honest and direct conversations when and where it matters most," she says. "It's time to get people, nationals, who are successful, and use them to help turn the lives of girls and boys around. Girls and boys also need help to better relate to each other." She suggests that parents, in this country, can do with some extra lessons on parenting. "Yes, parents need some good education as well. Parents need to be a stronger counter-voice," she adds within the context of a juvenile delinquency problem that has escalated way out of control. She also contends that boys in T&T, need some gender re-socialising. "And then, there's the boys component. Boys are people too. Parents need to start teaching boys the same things they are teaching girls because these strict gender roles are not working."

She's not surprised that American media has infiltrated just about every home and every young mind in this country but she's shocked that there's no balance. "Young people are watching more American TV here than in America," she laughs. "Since I've been here, I've seen more American media that anything else." The absence of after-school programmes also worries her. "I'm very scared about that and Zeno (Constance) was telling me that after school everybody just wants to jump in a maxi taxi," she says as she questions the commitment that the education system has with children and parents. "After-school programmes are very important." She understands very well, given her own work in the US that the disconnect between school and student and parent and child can become a benchmark for failure, in school and life. "I would also suggest some sex education and relationships education as well." She has lived in Senegal and Paris while working on her book, Race, Culture and Identity: Francophone West African and Caribbean Literature and Theory From Négritude to Créolité; in all that she says there's comparative analysis, in a voice that offers the possibility of changing the outlook of communities and helping women and girls change the world itself. And for the people of Fyzabad; particularly the young people, she has one wish. "It would be that they take education seriously so they can have careers and not jobs and take themselves to the next level." And for all the young people of T&T, she says: "This is the 21st century be serious about your education and your careers; be independent; it is such a wonderful thing."

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Editor's Note Dr Shireen Lewis has a goal

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