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Kathy Humphrey has a commitment 'to improve the lives of others'

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More than 200 people showed up on Jan. 21 to honor Senior Vice Chancellor for Engagement Kathy Humphrey (center). (Aimee Obidzinski/University of Pittsburgh)

By DONOVAN HARRELL

When people bring up Kathy Humphrey in a conversation, the conversation often swings to her enormous extended family of more than 90 nieces and nephews from her 10 siblings.

But the more than 200 faculty, staff and students who filled the William Pitt Union nearly to capacity at the Equipoise MLK Unity Luncheon on Jan. 21 showed that her family extends deep into the Pitt community as well.

Dean of Students Kenyon Bonner, keynote speaker for the luncheon, said he had an “interesting task” to introduce a woman who’s impacted so many lives, accomplished so much and is so beloved by the Pitt community.

“How do you introduce a woman who needs no introduction?” he said as the luncheon attendees laughed.

Bonner gushed over Humphrey, who he said has been a dear mentor and friend to him and countless others during her time at Pitt.

“Kathy is a familiar presence to our students and comforting reminder of the things that make us all feel the same: valued, appreciated, understood, and most importantly, loved,” Bonner said. “Kathy, not the tower of the Cathedral that we all love and cherish, but Kathy, a towering woman, full of life who has changed lives in ways only she can with the perfect amount of kindness, motivation and compassion that resonates with so many of our students as they find their way along ... through these sometimes difficult journeys through college.”

Humphrey said she was humbled to be honored at the annual luncheon and to be the recipient of this year’s Creating a Just Community Award from Equipoise.

“I keep thinking about this, and I think it’s not right that you get honored for doing something you love,” she said, chuckling. “It’s just not right. I feel like I’ve already been so rewarded by just doing the work.”

Family values

Humphrey’s immediate family includes her two twin sons, David and Daniel, and her husband of nearly 35 years, Lyle.

But it was her parents, Harold and Cora Wilson, who instilled the importance of education and inclusion in her at an early age. They had experienced Jim Crow firsthand and migrated from Louisiana to Michigan hoping to give their 11 children more educational opportunities than they had.

Their experiences, and other firsthand accounts of Jim Crow-era laws, helped solidify Humphrey’s commitment to diversity and inclusion.

“It helps me to understand my commitment to this issue of diversity and inclusion because it has a personal effect on me,” Humphrey said. “Knowing what it is to survive being a woman of color, to try to progress as a woman of color — if I can make that easier for somebody else, it’s my responsibility to do that work.”

Harold Wilson was a bricklayer who often left architectural blueprints sprawled across the family dinner table, Humphrey said, where he taught their children math and grammar. Thanks to him always inviting people of all backgrounds to their home, he taught Humphrey that people, no matter their background, are to be respected.

“The greatest crime you could commit in front of my father was to make fun of, or devalue another person,” Humphrey said. “He just didn’t tolerate that. And my dad was a very calm guy, he sent the message at a very young age that everyone had value and that has just been a part of my life.”

Cora Wilson earned her associate's degree the same year Humphrey graduated from high school, she said. However, she wasn't able to fulfill her ultimate goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

She inspired Humphrey to value her education as she went on to earn her master's at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and a Ph.D. in educational leadership at Saint Louis University.

Humphrey said that a week before her mother passed away in 2000, she asked Humphrey how long it would take to finish her Ph.D.

"At the time, I had no idea, but I said 'Mama, it takes a long time,'" she said of the hospital visit. "She died two days later. And I think that if I said, 'Oh, I'm going to finish in two months,' or even a year, she'd have figured out how to see that happen, because it was so important to her that our children had an opportunity to get a better education."

This was especially true since Cora lived in the early 1900s, just a few generations away from slavery, Humphrey added.



A trio led by Nicole Mitchell, head of Jazz Studies at Pitt, entertained during the Equipoise luncheon. (Aimee Obidzinski/University of Pittsburgh)

Accomplishments in diversity and inclusion

Her family also extends deep into the Pitt community.

Formerly the dean of students, Humphrey carried on the values her parents set as she would occasionally invite students of all backgrounds over to her house for dinner to try and expand her understanding of diversity and inclusion.

Her time as dean of students held several moments that she's been proud of, including developing the Cross-Cultural Leadership Development Center and moving black and white Greek organizations from separate locations to one location. Another one of the highlights,

she said was her and her staff helping make the campus more inclusive for members of the LGBTQIA+ community by implementing gender-neutral housing and bathrooms and changing Pitt's diversity statement to include them.

As senior vice chancellor for engagement, Humphrey said she's been especially proud of the expansion of diversity programs offered at Pitt, including a certificate program and a variety of workshops.

Chancellor Patrick Gallagher was very supportive of the idea of an Office of Diversity and Inclusion, leading to the birth of the office in 2015. Since then, the office has grown to focus on sexual misconduct and disabilities. In addition, faculty and staff have been able to join Pitt Communities, groups with shared beliefs and backgrounds.

"The chancellor, initially, he said to me when he got here, 'Kathy, I hear people talking a lot about diversity and inclusion here. But there's really no real culture of diversity and inclusion.' I couldn't help but to agree. And so that is really how we came up with creating the Office of Diversity and Inclusion."

Humphrey also has enjoyed the success and growth of the Community Engagement Centers in Homewood and the Hill District, which are part of her office. She has heavily supported the centers since the very beginning.

Since the Homewood center opened in 2018, the centers have further expanded Pitt's outreach to people from diverse backgrounds, she added.

"Inclusion and diversity really happen at the apex of relationships," Humphrey said. "We are creating relationships not only internally, but externally. Those relationships will help us do a better job of creating a culture of inclusion."

Humphrey said that her work has been extremely rewarding. However, she's faced some bumps along the road.

"It's always difficult when people exhibit behavior that is contrary to a culture of diversity and inclusion," Humphrey said. "One of the challenges is this issue is not an issue where you can force, it is a heart condition. And rarely do you change the heart with force."

As dean of students, she would sometimes get calls from parents who said they wanted to separate their children from students in underrepresented groups.

"You can drown in the frustration or you can decide you're going to swim," Humphrey said. "But you have to make some decisions. If you're going to do this work, you've got to know that there's some negatives that come along with it. And you've got to be able to roll with the negatives so that you can get to your ultimate prize, and your ultimate is making it better."

She's also had to address incidents of racial violence in the Pitt community and in the broader Pittsburgh community, including the Tree of Life mass shooting and the Antwon Rose Jr. shooting and subsequent protests.

"I think every inappropriate situation that happens, it is an opportunity to learn how to make our community stronger. And I think that's what we have to be in the constant business of, is that if we fail that we learn from those failures, and we move the institution forward."

Humphrey also has faced personal some personal difficulties in recent years. Michael Rosfeld, the former East Pittsburgh police officer who shot and killed Rose, arrested her son Daniel and others while they were outside the Garage Door Saloon in June 2018. He was a member of the Pitt Police at the time. Rosfeld was fired after an internal investigation.

The incident sparked a series of lawsuits. Rosfeld most recently filed a lawsuit on Jan. 16 against Humphrey, the University and Pitt Police alleging that his rights were violated when he was fired after the Garage Door Saloon incident.

Humphrey said that because the lawsuits are still pending, she is unable to comment on them.

In 2018, Humphrey also was among three finalists who withdrew their application for a chancellor search at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, after faculty publicly challenged the qualifications of all the candidates.

Humphrey said her focus on her life's work — to improve the lives of others — helped and continues to help her through these personal issues.

"I have tried to live a life that has a positive impact on others' lives," Humphrey said. "Nobody has a life without challenges. We all do. It's how we manage those challenges."

Looking toward the future

In spite of Humphrey's work to make Pitt more diverse and inclusive, she said that the University still has a long way to go before it becomes a truly inclusive community.

To continue improving these efforts, Humphrey is carefully considering who she'll bring on as the new vice chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion. Pam Connelly, who most recently held the position, stepped down earlier this year.

Humphrey said she's looking for candidates who understand how to help increase diversity and inclusion and who are capable of comforting the community in the event of incidents.

She has faith that Pitt can one day become a truly inclusive environment if there are enough people working hard to make it a reality.

"We've got to really make some decisions about what will make us one of the most inclusive environments in the country. And by that, I mean, we have to collectively decide where are we going so that we can measure it (and) so that we cannot only measure it, but we can help everyone understand where we're going with this strategy of diversity and inclusion."

Pitt inspires her to do more, which is why she remains at the institution

"It's because I have been able to work with people who were willing to make a difference in the lives of other people."

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