



LEAVING THE FRONT DOOR WIDE OPEN

BY JOHNNY JOHNSON

You would never hear **Patrice Black Mitchell C'89** refer to herself as a trailblazer. She is much too modest for that.

But thanks in no small part to her efforts and her example, Salem College is today the most racially and ethnically diverse college in Winston-Salem.

Here's how her remarkable Salem journey began.

STUDENT LIFE

Patrice was not the first African American student to attend Salem College. But in 1986, she was the only black student in her class. She also stood out in another way.

"I took a pretty non-traditional path at Salem," she said.

Patrice was married right after high school. Her husband was in the Air Force and after Patrice graduated, she got a job straight away. Then along came a beautiful baby girl, Ryanne, and it didn't take Patrice long to realize that a college education was the best thing for her and her family.

“My goal was actually to go to Wake Forest,” she admits. “But they didn’t allow first-year students to enter in the spring.”

Fortunately, Salem did. So Patrice started at Salem during Jan Term and she planned to transfer to Wake at the first opportunity.

Life as a student wasn’t always easy.

Even though Patrice was married, had a daughter, and was living off campus, she was not old enough to be classified as an adult student. Consequently, she was having a very different college experience than her classmates were.

“I remember Ryanne even had to go to a few classes with me,” she said.

Despite a few rough patches, she was drawn in by Salem’s “not too big, not too small” quality that so many have fallen in love with through the years. That, coupled with the truly remarkable teachers who cared so deeply about each of their students, convinced her to stay.

“Back then, there were not many students who looked like me—less than a handful—and I said, ‘You know, I think I could really make some noise on this campus,’” she said with a chuckle.

She also knew that every positive thing she did would help make it a little easier for the next student of color who came after her.

Three-and-a-half years later she was turning the tassel of her mortarboard over in the May Dell.

DIVERSIFYING SALEM

Soon after Patrice graduated, Salem began to make a major push to increase the diversity of its student body. Salem’s admissions team could think of no one better to help the College do that than Patrice.

So she was hired as an admissions counselor and she hit the road covering the territory from Baltimore to Atlanta. During her second year of recruiting in the admissions office, she had successfully signed ten African American students for the incoming freshman class.

“I knew from experience that Salem would offer students of color a great foundation,” she said. “I would always tell their parents: ‘I realize you are putting your child in our hands. Here’s my phone number. We’re going to take care of her.’”

Long story short, Patrice’s recruiting efforts helped change the face of Salem. Today, over 40 percent of Salem’s traditional undergraduates are students of color.

When she considers that percentage, Patrice can’t help looking back to the first day she arrived at Salem, her father bursting with pride.

“I just can’t believe I’m bringing you here,” she recalls her father saying as he was driving her to the College.

Salem College held a special significance for Patrice’s father because his grandfather, George Henry Black, was a master brickmaker who had handcrafted many of the bricks that still grace the campus.

George Henry Black had originally come to Winston-Salem in 1889 after walking fifty miles with his father, a former slave, because the two of them had heard they could make \$1.50 a day working together as brickmakers.

Sadly, George’s father died shortly after the move and George had to work extra hard to help support his family. But he learned the ropes quickly and he soon excelled at his trade. Eventually, the bricks that he forged were used to construct the Salem College Library, as well as mansions in Winston-Salem’s Buena Vista neighborhood, R.J. Reynolds’ office buildings, and several of Wachovia Bank’s branch offices. His bricks were also used in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg.

Word of George Black’s extraordinary craftsmanship spread far beyond North Carolina, and in 1971 legendary broadcaster Charles Kuralt came to Winston to interview Black for his Peabody Award-winning segment for the CBS Evening News, “On the Road.” After the interview aired, George Black and his family were invited to the White House to meet President Richard M. Nixon. Soon thereafter, the US Agency for International Development asked George to travel to Guyana to teach people there how to make bricks by hand.



In 2011, thirty-one years after George Black’s death, the Winston-Salem City Council designated the George Black House and Brickyard as a historic landmark.

Patrice’s father once recalled that as a young boy he would occasionally be asked to help his granddad deliver bricks to Salem College.

“Your grandfather and I would have to bring the bricks to the back door, because we were not allowed to use the front door,” he told her. “But today, I’m

taking you in the front door.”

That story is one reason Patrice says she’ll always have a unique connection with Salem College. It’s also a reason she felt she had to do all she could to help diversity blossom at Salem.

“It means a lot to me,” she said. “I gave 100 percent, and if I didn’t believe in Salem I couldn’t have done that. They wanted to move forward and expose their students to people of diverse backgrounds. I know what it meant to me, and I’m honored that I was able to contribute to the cause in some small way.”

Today, Dr. Patrice Black Mitchell serves as vice president for student services at Trident Technical College in Charleston, South Carolina.

No doubt her father is still bursting with pride.

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— Patrice Black Mitchell

Editor’s Note: Thanks to the Winston-Salem Journal for providing historical background information on George Henry Black.