

# TRUE BLUE *in the* WHITE HOUSE

*In the age of Obama,  
alumnae play key roles  
in the administration*

BY TOMIKA DEPRIEST, C'89

Blacks' association with the White House can be traced back to 1792 when many free and enslaved individuals were called upon to build the presidential home. And women have played a number of critical roles throughout history, from first lady Mary Lincoln's dressmaker and stylist, Elizabeth Keckly, in the 1800s to former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, the highest-ranking Black woman in U.S. government history, appointed in 2005.



Spelman women have also left indelible marks on the White House – women such as Audrey Forbes Manley, C'55 (first alumna president), who was deputy surgeon general in 1994 and acting surgeon general 1995–1997 during the Clinton Administration, and Marian Wright Edelman, C'60 (first alumna board chair), who was hailed by Hillary Clinton as a mentor during her husband's administration and who was a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2000. Currently, four alumnae are building on this “true blue” tradition through their work in the Obama administration.



*Kiran Ahuja, C'93*



*Russlynn Ali, C'91*

### **KIRAN AHUJA, C'93**

Kiran Ahuja is leading the charge for an Executive Order dedicated to improving “the quality of life and opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders through increased access to, and participation in, federal programs in which they may be underserved.” Appointed December 14, 2009, she is responsible for advising federal agency leadership on effective strategies and tactics for implementation of programs and services. Raised in Savannah, Georgia, Ahuja credits Spelman with heightening her knowledge, awareness and activism around issues of race, gender and class.

“Spelman taught me to be a strong and dynamic leader. My professors taught me to work hard, be critical of what I saw around me, and serve as a good example to my peers,” said Ms. Ahuja. “I would not be where I am today, serving as the executive director of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, without their support and positive influence.”

Ms. Ahuja points to her office’s effort to help Southeast Asian Americans and other minority communities in the Gulf impacted by the oil spill as the greatest accomplishment to date. “Unknown to many, there are thousands of Southeast Asian Americans (particularly Vietnamese Americans) who are fisher folk and work in the seafood industry. Their lives have not only been devastated by Hurricane Katrina, but four years later they are struggling to save a way of life they have known for more than 30 years and to stay afloat because of the oil spill,” she explained. She works with a team to ensure community members and federal agencies are serving local Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the Gulf. The goal is to make certain that they are represented throughout the recovery process and that information is translated into

appropriate languages so the community stays informed about resources [and] opportunities.”

Ms. Ahuja says she enjoys her job very much because she gets to remove barriers and improve access to federal resources for an underserved population. “The AAPI community is diverse and complex with over 50 different ethnic subgroups and 100 different languages, and it faces numerous challenges that often go unnoticed,” she noted.

Ms. Ahuja cites several Spelman mentors and professors with “stretching” her and helping her to further develop as a leader. “Dr. Johnnetta Cole was president at the time, and she had a powerful impact on many of us. We looked up to her; we thought she was an incredible leader,” she said. “In addition, I admired many of my professors: Drs. Jeanne Meadows, Marilyn Davis and Desiree Pedescleaux. They displayed a lot of integrity, sensibility and passion, and that definitely influences the kind of person I try to be everyday in my personal life and in my work with the initiative and on behalf of Asian American Pacific Islander populations in America.”

### **RUSSLYNN ALI, C'91**

On May 1, 2009, Russlynn Ali was confirmed by the U.S. Senate as assistant secretary for civil rights, serving as primary adviser to Secretary Arne Duncan and responsible for enforcement of U.S. civil rights laws as they relate to education and for making certain that institutions receiving federal funding do not discriminate based on race, sex, disability or age. A nationally known advocate prior to her nomination to the post by President Obama, Ms. Ali formerly served as a vice president at Education TrustWest in Oakland, California. Her focus there was on closing the achievement gap in the state, and increasing curriculum and instructional quality. In addition, the former teacher

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*Kristen Jarvis, C'2003*

advised legislative and gubernatorial staff.

“Russlynn brings passion for, expertise in and dedication to equality and fairness in education, and her tireless work and commitment have changed the lives of low-income students from across the nation. I very much look forward to working with her,” said Secretary Duncan, upon the formal announcement of her nomination.

Her background as a lawyer and teacher has prepared her well for her current opportunity. Ms. Ali practiced corporate and civil rights law and served as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Southern California School of law prior to entering the nonprofit sector. Although some critics are uncomfortable with the notion of using civil rights laws to deal with the problems of re-

segregation in American schools, Ms. Ali stands firmly behind the Obama administration’s objective to address the issue of non-enforcement of these laws. “The challenge is to reinvigorate the civil rights office and doing what’s right and fair for America,” she told an audience at the NAACP convention in Kansas City this year. Elaborating in a conversation with Mike Petrilli, which he posted in the Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s *Flypaper*, she added, “It’s about culture change. No one’s ever tried to put robust remedies in place. We have to monitor the districts, enforce the agreement [and] use all the tools at the disposal of the civil rights office.”

Ms. Ali points to Dr. Lois Moreland as one of her most significant mentors, noting her grace and quiet strength as key attributes to emulate. “As I work to mentor young people now, I often reflect on what Dr. M. would do . . . and then try to stretch and do it,” said the one-time liaison to Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund, adding that

Spelman values such as “teamwork and teambuilding, loyalty, commitment to public service and a tireless work ethic” are also part of who she has become today.

Noting that her days start early in the morning with “too much coffee” and time for meditation and reflection, and ends “late at night by reviewing my next day’s briefing book in preparation for a day packed with meetings and

deliverables,” it is clear she stands ready for the challenge.

“Personally, every day I go to bed humbled to sit on this perch at a time when both the President and the Secretary of Education have said education is the civil rights issue of our time. My sense of urgency is great, and my sense of responsibility is greater still.”

### **KRISTEN JARVIS, C’2003**

Kristen Jarvis is to first lady Michelle Obama what a GPS system is for those who have them – an excellent navigator. As a special assistant for scheduling and a traveling aide for Mrs. Obama, she puts in many miles handling important details – from trips abroad with special guests such as Oprah Winfrey to swank state dinners. “There’s no time to get sick,” Ms. Jarvis told a *Newsweek* reporter in 2009. “You’re on call.” Her influence spans the East and West Wings. Some of the young professionals working in the administration were hired by Ms. Jarvis during her time in Obama’s Senate office. The list includes Joshua DuBois, current executive director of the White House faith office, health reform director Jeanne Lambrew and political director Patrick Gaspard – to name a few.

Before she landed in her current role supporting first lady Mrs. Obama, Ms. Jarvis spent time as a special assistant to the chief of staff and as deputy chief of staff to Senator Barack Obama from 2004 to 2007. She has also served as a staffer for former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle prior to working for Senator Obama. During the campaign, she served as a scheduler in Nevada and on the press advance team, and then worked with Mrs. Obama during the general election.

Mike Strautmanis, Ms. Jarvis’ former supervisor in Obama’s senate office, commented in an article: “I worried a lot about the first lady as the campaign continued and all of our lives changed. I wanted her to be around people who would take care of her; and I knew Kristen would take care of her.” He added, “She has a maturity that is uncommon not only for someone of her age but for anyone.”

Not quite 30, Ms. Jarvis already has an impressive career in politics and governmental service. As a young African American woman she has achieved more in her short years than some will in a lifetime. From the trip to Copenhagen to make the case for Chicago hosting the 2016 Olympics to the first family trip to Ghana to the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Ms. Jarvis has shared intimate moments with the first family and the first lady as a critical aide.

She described an election night experience to a reporter, who recorded it as follows: “When we got to the hotel, I think they had just called Virginia. Right after [Obama] gave the speech. I said ‘Congratulations, Senator,’ and I stopped because I was wrong. I looked back, and then he gave me a look like, “Wow, I am the president.”

#### **KRISTLYN WHIGHAM, C’2007**

Kristlyn Whigham was a spring intern in the White House in 2009 and worked in the communications office of First Lady Michelle Obama. She is currently a student in the graduate journalism program at Georgetown University, building on her degree in political science from Spelman and her experience as the former editor-in-chief of the *Spotlight*.

“As an intern in the First Lady’s Press Office, I was responsible for daily news clips and media monitoring. The position required that I get up very early to have the news clips ready for the staff. I also had the opportunity to assist with interviews and press events,” explained Ms. Whigham. “[Working in] the Obama administration was such an amazing experience. Furthermore, the opportunity to work in the office of the first African American First Lady was incredible. I interned in her office when she launched “Let’s Move,” so I was able to witness firsthand the enthusiasm and excitement the American people feel for her.”

Ms. Whigham says Spelman provided her with a strong foundation academically and socially, enhancing

her sense of community and responsibility. “Spelman College has shown me that nothing is impossible. With hard work and dedication, I can accomplish any goal,” she revealed, citing Ms. Renita Mathis, associate director of communications at Spelman and former advisor to the *Spotlight*, as an important mentor. “From the very moment that we step onto campus, they provide an environment that pushes us to reach towards the heavens, without forgetting those who came before us, and those that will come after.”

Ms. Whigham wants students and alumnae to know that it is never too early or too late to pursue an interest in politics. Find an organization and volunteer, pursue an internship with a congressman, she advises. “Politics is an occupation that has a direct impact on our lives so I think it’s important that more people become involved, and with the election of the president you are seeing younger Americans take an interest, as well as more African Americans.”

**TOMIKA DEPRIEST, C’89**, is executive director of communications at Spelman.



*Kristlyn Whigham, C’2003*

## President Obama Appoints Major Harris, C’64, to Key Administration Post

**Major General Marcelite Harris, C’64, has been appointed to the Board of Visitors to the United States Air Force Academy.**

Major Harris retired from the U.S. Air Force in 1997 as the highest-ranking woman officer in the Air Force and the Nation’s highest ranking African American woman in the Department of Defense. General Harris’ distinguished career in the service included many “firsts,” as she was the first woman aircraft maintenance officer; one of the first two women air officers commanding at the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Air Force’s first woman vice commander for maintenance. Her service medals and decorations include the Bronze Star, the Presidential Unit Citation, and

the Vietnam Service Medal. Upon retirement from the Air Force, General Harris served NASA as the Florida site director and logistics process owner for the company managing the Nation’s Shuttle Program, United Space Alliance. She is now Treasurer of the Atlanta Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and serves as a director on the board of Peachtree Hope Charter School. In 1999, General Harris was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from Spelman College, where she had previously earned her B.A. in speech and drama. She also holds a B.S. in business management from the University of Maryland University College.



*Marcelite Harris, C’64*