Fantastic Four

40 Under 40 Phenomenal Women

Fierce and fabulous Spelman alumnae

Pictured (left to right) are Ashley Lamothe, LaDonna Boyd, Karen Fields-Lever and Fallon Wilson
Ashley Lamothe, C’2006, the owner of a thriving Chick-fil-A restaurant
Fantastic Four
Fierce and Fabulous Spelman Alumnae
40 Under 40 Phenomenal Women

Fallon Wilson, C’2005, an industry disrupter with Black in Tech Nashville
Fantastic Four

Fierce and Fabulous Spelman Alumnae

40 Under 40 Phenomenal Women

Dr. Karen Fields-Lever, C’2003, making beautiful smiles with 28 to Brush Dental Studio
LaDonna Boyd, C’2007, taking up the legacy mantle as CEO of R.H. Boyd Publishing Corp.
On the Cover
Our fantastic four cover (left to right) features Ashley Lamothe, LaDonna Boyd, Karen Fields-Lever and Fallon Wilson.

COVER PHOTO BY SCOTT KING

President’s Message

Spelman Scenes
Bester VII, Newington Green, London, 2017
© Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York.

ARTS@Spelman

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Founders Day

FEATURING

Four fantastic Spelman alumnae share their stories of life and success.

BY
ADRIENNE HARRIS
ALICIA LURRY
FRANK MCCOY
KIA SMITH, C’2004

40 Under 40 Phenomenal Women

40 Under 40 fierce and fabulous Spelman alumnae

BY
MELODY GREEN, C’2020
JANA HOBSON, C’2020
TIERRA MCCLAIN, C’2021

Faculty Sabbaticals Offer Personal and Professional Renewal

BY CONNIE FREIGHTMAN
Scholarship and Leadership

No one would debate the necessity of research for college faculty. And Spelman College is blessed with faculty whose research agendas are cutting edge and provide our students with a rich undergraduate research environment. College presidents, however, may find it a challenge to maintain an active research agenda and run a first-rate academic institution. Maintaining the day-to-day academic excellence of Spelman and planning for Spelman’s future excellence, for example, would seem to preclude time for the kind of careful research and investigation that sound scholarship requires.

Still, administrative responsibilities notwithstanding, I believe it is important for college presidents to be actively engaged in life-long learning and the creation of knowledge. Why? First, because it reinforces the higher education mission by demonstrating that even at the highest ranks — and, perhaps, especially at the highest ranks — continued learning and growth are essential.

Second, it is important because scholarship, in and of itself, is a powerful form of leadership. Scholarship is a way for leaders to probe conventional wisdom, discover new ways of looking at old problems, and understand a global context larger than ourselves and our institutions. A renewed vision inspires us to lead and navigate the future with greater insight and integrity.

I came to appreciate the vital link between scholarship and leadership for my own presidency during the process of completing the researching, writing and publication of my most recent book, An American Odyssey: The Life and Work of Romare Bearden. Published by Oxford University Press, and released just after Labor Day, the book examines the life of an acclaimed 20th century painter who used art to explore Black identity in America.

In pursuit of information about Bearden, I discovered, to my delight, his connection with historically Black colleges and universities. He attended Lincoln University for a year from 1929 to 1930, and, while there, began his interest in drawing cartoons. After graduating eventually from NYU, he traveled during the 1940s with Charles Henry Alston, his cousin by marriage and a celebrated Harlem Renaissance artist and teacher, to the Atlanta University Center. There, they met Hale Woodruff who started the first art department at an HBCU and whose epic mural, Amistad Mutiny, was an inspiration for both young artists. Years later, Bearden returned to the AUC, during President Albert Manley’s tenure and was artist-in-residence at Spelman when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and lay in state in Sisters Chapel.

HBCUs are often not adequately credited with their role in the development of the arts. But their support of individual artists as faculty, the training these faculty provide to their students who go on to become major artists themselves, and the collections and archives housed in our institutions are invaluable. Amy Sherald, for example, who painted the now famous portrait of first lady Michelle Obama hanging in the National Portrait Gallery, returns to the Spelman Fine Arts Museum for an exhibition in the spring of 2019. She is a graduate of Clark Atlanta University who took many of her fine arts courses at Spelman College.

In writing the book, I confirmed my belief that Black artists have become adept at visually depicting the complexity and richness of Black life and culture. As is the case with Romare Bearden and others — Amy Sherald, Mickelene Thomas, Titus Kaphar, Carrie Mae Weems, Kerry James Marshall — their skill has been a creative form of resistance that gives us strength and clarity about the potency and promise of our culture. They remind us, too, that as we remain “undaunted by the fight,” imagination is a potent force.

As a college president, I believe a lifetime of learning and scholarship can reawaken a leader to deep truths that sustain the vitality of an institution for the long haul and give a leader a glimpse of the way forward.

Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ph.D.
President, Spelman College
CELEBRATING A KING

BY TIERRA MCCLAIN, C’2021

Earlier this year, Spelman honored the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in a series of commemorations. Remembered as a civil rights leader, scholar and revolutionary spirit, King and his legacy brought together students, faculty, and alumnae to reflect on his impact.

On Jan. 15, 2018, in connection with the Bonner Office and The King Center, the College participated in a march and rally to honor King’s birthday. Spelman students and volunteers joined in the march, which culminated at the King Center in downtown Atlanta.

Reflections of his life continued in April. On April 4, 2018, at 6:01 p.m., Spelman’s campus observed the global bell ringing signaling the assassination of King 50 years ago. Members of the community stopped to reflect on King’s national and global impact, but also his spirit here in the Atlanta University Center, where his desire to positively change the world began.


To conclude the King celebration, a Sisters Chapel event, Sunday, April 8, 2018, honored King, who laid in state at Spelman in 1968, at the Founders Day Worship Service, also in partnership with the class of 1968.

Tierra McClain is a second-year English major with aspirations to become a public interest lawyer.
COMMENCEMENT 2018

In a packed Georgia International Convention Center room, Rosalind Gates Brewer, C’84, group president and chief operating officer for Starbucks, delivered the 2018 commencement address to 472 graduating seniors and their 8,000 family members and friends May 20, 2018.

Brewer as commencement speaker marked the first alumna in 30 years to give the address. It was Marian Wright Edelman, C’60, who provided the address in 1988. In addition to Brewer, the commencement platform included honorary degree recipient Bryan Stevenson, founding executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative; National Community Service Award recipient Lonnie G. Bunch III, director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture; and student leaders, trustees and special guests.

Pictured (left to right) are Nia Malone, C’2020, student trustee, Spelman Board of Trustees; Jill Cartwright, C’2018, student representative, Spelman Board of Trustees; President Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ph.D.; Rosalind Brewer, C’84, chair, Spelman Board of Trustees; and Briana Whitmore, C’2018, senior class president.

There were 472 graduating seniors in the Class of 2018.

Pictured (left to right) are Lonnie G. Bunch, Community Service Award recipient; Dr. Campbell; Roz Brewer; and Bryan A. Stevenson, honorary degree recipient.

Rosalind (Roz) Brewer, C’84, was the first alumna commencement speaker in 30 years.
After 41 years of teaching, 37 at Spelman, Albert Thompson, Ph.D., retired his lab coat to join his retired siblings, friends, and relatives in travel and ease of life. It was 1981 when Thompson entered the gates of the College to join the four-member faculty in the chemistry department.

“The enrollment at the College was about 1,400 to 1,500 students, and STEM majors were less than 300,” said Thompson, whose interest in chemistry was piqued in elementary school by Sputnik 1, the first artificial Earth satellite launched in 1957 by the Soviet Union. “The chemistry department only offered the first two years of the curriculum and biochemistry courses.”

Also, according to Thompson, the Division of Science and Mathematics only offered biology, mathematics and chemistry degrees. Today, of the more than 2,000 students, 741 major in one of 10 science, technology, engineering and mathematics-related offerings.

Thompson excelled in high school biology, chemistry and physics classes, but it was laboratory experiments in 11th-grade chemistry that appealed to him the most. In 1973, the Houston resident headed to Texas Southern University where he received a bachelor’s in chemistry, followed by a master’s in inorganic chemistry in 1975. In 1978, he received his doctorate in inorganic chemistry from Howard University.

“While in college, I wanted to pursue a career as a research chemist and possibly work for DuPont,” said Thompson, who held summer internships with IBM and DuPont while in college. “After becoming a chemistry tutor in college, I was encouraged by my students and teachers to consider a teaching career.”

Thompson began his teaching career in the mid-70s as an instructor of physical science at Houston Community College and chemistry at Texas Southern University. Later, he became an assistant professor of chemistry at Fisk University, followed by an assistant professorship at Fayetteville State University. In 1981, Thompson became a faculty research fellow at the U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine before joining Spelman, where he served as professor and chair of both the chemistry department and the Division of Science and Mathematics.

His knack to inspire, mentor, and advise became a driving force that helped catapult Spelman’s STEM program.

“Dr. Thompson always had the best interests of the students, our department, and the STEM disciplines at heart throughout his time at Spelman,” said Lisa Hibbard, Ph.D., who served for 33 years alongside Thompson in the chemistry department. “He sought out funding opportunities to support student training programs in the STEM departments that supported student summer programs for several years, which elevated him nationally as a leader in promoting excellence in student training at HBCUs.”

Thought of as a vital pipeline component to create future chemists, Thompson’s mentorship and support of young scientists is not without notice.

“He would constantly think about ways to help young scientists, especially faculty, and would go out of his way to provide them with information and opportunities to help them succeed,” said Peter Chen, Ph.D., professor of chemistry. “He has been such an incredible role model as a mentor of younger faculty.”

Thompson’s daughters, Amber, C’2007, and Tayloir, C’2018, were exposed to Spelman’s culture from an early age. From the Spelman Nursery to the Children’s Dance Program to various undergraduate programs, their father’s life at the College made a significant impact on their lives, also.

“Honestly it is still weird to say that my dad no longer teaches at Spelman,” said Tayloir, the 2018 computer science graduate who is attending graduate school at the University of Michigan. “This year’s commencement was bittersweet for both of us because our time at Spelman officially came to an end. It’s amazing to see the influence my dad has had on Spelman, and I am truly excited to see how he will continue to give back to Spelman now that he is no longer there.”

An analyst at the U.S. Department of Treasury, Amber, who majored in economics at Spelman, is happy her dad is retiring. “He has worked very hard during his time at Spelman and deserves to enjoy retirement knowing he has actively contributed to making Spelman the No. 1 HBCU,” said the Georgia State University MBA graduate. “For Spelman, I think his presence will be missed. The faculty, staff, and students are losing his institutional knowledge, expertise and mentorship.”

Surrounded by friends, colleagues and family, Thompson celebrated his retirement from Spelman April 25, 2018.

THOMPSON CLOSES CHAPTER ON STORIED CAREER AT SPELMAN
Unlike the majestic Dora Milaje of the mythical Wakanda in the blockbuster movie “Black Panther,” Zanele Muholi’s battles have been real.

Through their work, the South African photographer and visual activist has fought racism, sexism and discrimination and used their lens as a weapon to address critical issues, including gender-based violence and hate crimes against LGBTQ communities.

This fall, “Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness,” an internationally touring exhibition organized by Autograph, London, and curated by Renée Mussai, premiered in the United States at the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art under director Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, Ph.D., C’93.

“Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail The Dark Lioness” features more than 70 black-and-white self-portraits of Muholi and asks critical questions about social justice, human rights, and contested representations of the Black body. The photographs, taken between 2014 and 2017 in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa, employ the conventions of classical painting and fashion photography. Somnyama Ngonyama translates to “hail the dark lioness” in isiZulu, one of the official languages of South Africa.

Based in Johannesburg, Muholi uses their body as a canvas to confront the politics of race and representation in the visual archive. “I’m reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other,” said Muholi. “My reality is that I do not mimic being Black; it is my skin, and the experience of being Black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as Black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.”

Muholi’s self-proclaimed mission is “to re-write a Black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in South Africa and beyond.” Muholi, who holds a master of fine arts in documentary media from Ryerson University in Toronto, co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women in 2002 and Inkanyiso, a forum for queer and visual (activist) media, in 2009.

“Planning for this wonderful exhibition has been several years in the making, and we are proud to be the site for the first unveiling in the country and to welcome the artist for a scholarly exchange about blackness, gender, sexuality and portraiture,” said Brownlee. “This exhibition underscores the Museum’s commitment to presenting challenging, dynamic and relevant exhibitions that explore timely contemporary concerns.”

Brownlee said for Muholi to label theirselves a visual activist is itself a radical act. “It is a bold position for an African woman and an artist to challenge human rights across the globe. This exhibition, featuring a selection of dynamic portraits, is about blackness and confronting the politics of race and bold issues that are not addressed in the mainstream media,” said Brownlee. “Spelman is proud to provide another platform to promote diversity, tolerance and inclusion.”

In partnership with Autograph (a London-based arts charity), Art Papers and Atlanta Celebrates Photography, the Museum hosted a conversation with Muholi and Renée Mussai, the curator of the exhibition, Sept. 14.

The exhibition is open until Dec. 8.
A seminal work in American literature, Lorraine Hansberry’s “A Raisin in the Sun” tells the timeless story of a Black family attempting to establish themselves financially while combating racism in society and dealing with ongoing familial conflict. The award-winning play, which was critically and commercially successful at its release, premiered on Broadway in 1959. Since then, “A Raisin in the Sun” has been reproduced a number of times: on Broadway, off-Broadway, as film, and in community theaters.

While most Americans are familiar with Hansberry’s work via these productions, or as a staple in high school curriculum, little is known about the life of Hansberry, who died of cancer at the age of 35 in 1965. Writer and director Tracy Heather Strain is changing that. With the release of her 2017 documentary, “Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart,” Strain tells the story of Hansberry in such a beautiful and intriguing way that viewers are certain to walk away with undaunting admiration for Hansberry as a writer, an activist and a woman.

Strain was introduced to Hansberry’s work 40 years ago at a community theater production of “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” an off-Broadway production adapted from Hansberry’s letters, interviews, and journal entries in 1968. “She entered my consciousness, and stayed there,” Strain shared. “After college, I saw a lot of independent films, and something just came into me. I wanted to make a film about Lorraine Hansberry, and I wasn’t even a filmmaker.”

Strain began making “Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart” in 2004. Upon concluding her 14-year filmmaking journey, she screened the film to over 100 students and faculty members at Spelman College April 23, a treat for students who are studying in the College’s new documentary filmmaking program.

“I love it,” said author, activist and Spelman College alumna Alice Walker, one of four panelists who participated in a post-screening discussion with the Spelman community. Joining Strain and Walker on the panel were filmmaker and Distinguished Professor in the Arts Julie Dash and actress LaTanya Richardson Jackson, C’75, who narrated “Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart.”

“I was struck by the brilliance of her mind and how [she] was ahead of her time,” shared Jackson. And that brilliance comes across in Strain’s film, which paints Hansberry as a paradox whose person and work appear safe, but beneath the surface neither play nor playwright is safe or unthreatened. Hansberry used her work and her voice to challenge racism. At a meeting between Robert Kennedy and Black cultural leaders that included James Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and others, Hansberry is quoted as telling Kennedy, “You are the best of what White America can offer us. If you can’t hear what we’re saying, then we don’t have any hope,” according to friends.

“Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart” explores Hansberry’s complex life, delving into her childhood and showing how it influenced and shaped her future art and activism. In addition to using Hansberry’s personal papers, home movies, and rare photos to tell the story of her life, Strain interviewed family, friends and colleagues, leaving viewers with a portrait of a self-confident Hansberry who was committed to advocating for her community through story and voice. Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Harry Belafonte, and her sister, Mamie Hansberry, all appear in the film. For more information, visit sightedeyesfeelingheart.com.

Kia Smith, C’2004, is a writer, music fan, culture freak and communications consultant.
April 20, 2018, marked a special day at Spelman. Classes were canceled, and students were demonstrating their intellectual prowess. It was Research Day, a day that elevates the “Spelman Difference.”

“Research Day affords Spelman students the ability to graduate with a competitive edge. It is a day that exemplifies why Spelman remains in the top tier of historically Black colleges and universities and is highly ranked among national liberal arts colleges according to U.S. News and World Report,” said A. Nayena Blankson, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and co-chair of the Research Day committee.

Founded in 1989 as Science Day, it would be 2004 before the College’s annual event, which spotlighted the campus’ STEM-related disciplines, would become Research Day, an interdisciplinary, cross-collaboration day of scholarly works presented by students. From its humble beginnings of 41 student presenters to 246 in 2016, the day is confirmation of the vim and vigor of students and their faculty advisers.

**GETTING A WORLD VIEW**

For Lydia Laramore, C’2021, an English major, two classes – Understanding Modern China and Colonialism and Imperialism in the 20th Century – and a conversation with a friend prompted her first-place research.

“My Ethiopian roommate mentioned how the Chinese presence in Africa was reshaping Ethiopia,” said Laramore, who presented “Chinese Intervention in Africa: Anti-Imperialist Partner or Global Hegemon?” “These different experiences contributed to the development of my topic, and I thought that researching China’s presence in Africa, and its implications, was a perfect intersection of different disciplines and personal interests.”

Laramore thinks participating in Research Day helped her see how high the bar is set for Spelman students, stating it enabled her to clarify the real-world applications of what is presented in class.

“It also illustrated the importance of collaboration and sharing our work with the rest of the world. My research showed me how interdisciplinary the world really is,” said Laramore, who plans to further her research studies to shape public opinion and policy after graduating from Spelman. “It was a heavy atmosphere of intellectual exchange and dialogue that is becoming rare in the 21st century.”

**A MEANS TO AN END**

“Being a part of Research Day was important, not only for class, but also because it was an opportunity to put the skills and knowledge I learned within the classrooms into action,” said Destiny Jones, C’2018, whose poster presentation, “Suffering in Silence: The Relationship Between Attitudes Toward Seeking Mental Health Services, Mental Health Stigma, and Racial Identity Among African American College Women,” took first place in her category. “With this opportunity, I became more confident in my research. I proved to myself I was very familiar with prior literature, and I knew how my research could possibly make a great impact within the field of psychology.”

Jones, a psychology major who graduated with departmental honors, is pursuing a master’s degree at the University of Massachusetts Lowell in community social psychology with a focus on social justice. She wants to be a catalyst for change.

“[My] research has also given me ideas I can take to my graduate school concerning promoting mental health awareness on campus,” said Jones, who admitted she suffered in silence because she did not want to, nor knew how to talk to anyone about her life-challenging problems. “For example, in graduate school, I can help organize intervention programs that shed light on mental health and mental health stigma.”

For Vanessa Eaton, C’2021, a biology major, a career as a researcher for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Food and Drug Administration is her goal.

“As a researcher, you have to be able to communicate your work to the public and scientific community effectively. Not only will this play a major part in my future career, but it also allows me the opportunity to inform others of something I am passionate about,” said Eaton, whose winning research was “The Effect of TGF-ß on MMP2 & MMP9 in Prostate Cancer in African American Men.”

“Because of my background in research, I am better prepared to be a competitive candidate in my field.”
“I wanted everyone who lives in this area to know about the quality of the water in our backyards, and Research Day was the perfect platform to accomplish this,” said Middleton, a chemistry major in the Dual Degree Engineering Program whose first-place research topic was titled, “Effects of Urbanization and Precipitation Extremes on Urban Watersheds.”

“Because I am very interested in the research and development sector of the engineering industry, Research Day helped me develop more skills as it pertains to interpreting and testing data; thus, I also gained more experience in developing and testing theories.”

Likewise for Camara Atkins, C’2018, whose interest in people and environmental debt led her to the research topic, “Socioeconomic Factors Impacting Household Debt.”

“I came up with my research topic through my interest in people, and specifically, in how each of us is born into a life that comes with certain consequences solely based on our environment,” said Atkins, an economics major who wants to become a financial literacy and professional development coach. “I think taking part in Research Day is important because we not only get the chance to show off what we are working on, but our research may also inspire someone to either help us on our journey of discovery or pick up where we leave off.”

**ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**
Spelman’s tagline, “A Choice to Change the World,” is not happenstance. Upon investigation, it was learned that young women who choose Spelman have a mindset to do extraordinary things to shape and make a difference in the world. Tamia Middleton, C’2020, is one such woman. She is interested in water quality and water chemistry.

**KEEPING A PROMISE**
The ability for students to meld classroom studies with their own concepts and opinions drives home the Spelman Promise to graduate students with a competitive edge that is unique to a Spelman education and is only one of the benefits of Research Day.

“We do it to bear witness to the fierce and varied intellectual inquiry, exploration, creativity and discovery that takes place here at Spelman every day,” said Sharon Davies, J.D., provost and vice president for Academic Affairs, at Research Day’s closing ceremony.

“We do it to give our outstanding students a platform to display what they have learned in the classroom and an opportunity to drill down on what they have learned and begin to hold themselves up and out as the next generation of researchers, creators, and innovators who will challenge orthodoxies, uncover new depths of understanding, and push the edges of human knowledge.”

Destiny Jones, C’2018
Lydia Laramore, C’2021
Vanessa Eaton, C’2021
Fierce and Fabulous Spelman Women

Dynamic, determined, innovative and captivating are the qualities our cover subjects embody. These four fantastic women – Dr. Karen Fields-Lever, C’2003, LaDonna Boyd, C’2004, Fallon Wilson, Ph.D., C’2005, and Ashley Lamothe, C’2006 – exemplify excellence and are making inroads in their respective fields. They desire not only to be great, but the best, uplifting their communities every step of the way.

These fantastic four are fiery, enterprising women. Excelling in technology, dentistry, franchising and the publishing world, they may differ in industry, but are alike in their chief claim: being true to their alma mater by changing the world and uplifting their community. Their light shines not because they solely work for themselves, but because they see the importance in forging connections, growing a legacy, and seeking diversity and representation in their respective fields.

Spelman women rarely fear change or adversity. In fact, they embrace it. They understand the power that arises from growth, bulldozing through any barrier to their dreams. Head and shoulders above the rest, Spelmanites leave the College pressing forward, ready to spark their respective career alight with blazing intellect and drive. Touched by sisterhood and women’s empowerment, they strive to join the list of firsts – the movers and shakers – showing there is no limit to what women can achieve. See what the Spelman Messenger’s lively and high-spirited fantastic four have done to achieve just that, and more, on the next page.
LaDonna Boyd, C’2007, does not allow her chief executive officer title to isolate her. As CEO of R.H. Boyd Publishing Corp., Boyd is always looking for opportunities to partner with community organizations.

“I don’t need to sit in the office all day. That’s not helpful. If there are things in the community that can help R.H. Boyd and vice versa, that’s where I need to be; and, that’s where I often find myself,” said Boyd, who partners with organizations like Metro Nashville Public Schools in an ongoing literacy campaign.

Community engagement is not new to Boyd, who studied economics during her matriculation at Spelman College. In fact, it is in her DNA and is a foundational principle of R.H. Boyd, a publishing company that specializes in printing and distributing Christian inspirational, and historical literature, pastoral resources and church supplies.

Boyd’s journey began over a century ago with the creativity and innovation of her great-great-grandfather, Dr. Richard Henry Boyd, who founded R.H. Boyd Publishing, formerly National Baptist Publishing Board, in 1896. Born a slave in Mississippi, Dr. Boyd was one of the most successful businessmen of his time when he died in Nashville in 1922.

“His legacy is one that still carries on to this day. It is still giving a platform to the Black experience through our voice from the Christian perspective,” Boyd shared. “I literally have a lineage of entrepreneurs, innovators, and those who seek to be change agents by giving an unbiased voice to the narrative of Black experience.”
Despite the familial connection, Boyd did not just walk into the C-suite at R. H. Boyd Publishing. Upon returning to Nashville in 2008 to pursue her MBA at Tennessee State University, Boyd began learning the family business, starting as special projects coordinator and later being promoted to chief operating officer. In October 2017, Boyd became the fifth-generation president and CEO, and the first woman to serve in this capacity.

“I’m blessed. I was born into an expectation of excellence. The decision to lead the company was never forced on me. My parents said, ‘This is an opportunity for you and you can take it.’ However, it was not forced,” Boyd said, acknowledging the external pressure and expectation that is often projected onto individuals.

Whether she spends the day in the boardroom, on conference calls, in marketing meetings, working on her dissertation for her doctorate from Pepperdine University, or serving her community working with community partners, Boyd takes her Spelman College experience with her. “Spelman taught me the concept of leadership and sisterhood – being able to rely on the strength of others – especially Black women,” she said. “Spelman gave me that respect for the strength, intellect, and opportunities provided to Black women by Black women. That’s something I hope I can continue to do in my work and life each day, especially in the context of faith, family and community, while giving voice to women and young girls.”

Just as many people watched her great-great-grandfather, LaDonna Boyd knows people are watching her, and she embraces it and sees it as an opportunity for future generations to follow in her footsteps and give them something of which to be proud.

She also offers a simple piece of advice to those striving to excel in their careers: “Be kind and soft with yourself. Self-care is so important.”

“SPELMAN TAUGHT ME THE CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP AND SISTERHOOD – BEING ABLE TO RELY ON THE STRENGTH OF OTHERS – ESPECIALLY BLACK WOMEN.”

— LADONNA BOYD
Dr. Karen Fields-Lever
Something to Smile About

BY ALICIA SANDS LURRY

While reflecting on her personal and professional success, Dr. Karen Fields-Lever, C’2003, quickly flashes a brilliant, white smile with the greatest of ease. Blessed with a booming dental practice, dynamic marriage and partnership, and the upcoming birth of her third child – a baby boy – in October, this proud Spelman alumna acknowledges that kindness, compassion, and the foundation of family and faith guide her path in all she does.

“You always want to treat people the way you want to be treated,” said Fields-Lever, an ebullient woman with a kind demeanor. “That’s something my mom used to always say, and that’s my philosophy of life, especially as a practitioner. I think that’s been ingrained in me since I was a young girl.”

At 36, Fields-Lever is busy blazing trails of her own in dentistry. The owner of 28 to Brush Dental Studio, a thriving dental practice in Forest Park, Illinois, just west of Chicago, she recently celebrated its five-year anniversary. To date, her practice now services over 3,000 patients, from infants to seniors.

A recent Chicago Scholars Foundation 35 under 35 honoree, Fields-Lever was recognized in 2018 as “America’s Best Dentist” by the National Consumer Advisory Board. In 2016, she added a mobile dentistry to the business, providing oral health services on-site at community centers and schools and in-school services to over 16,000 students.

Fields-Lever, a Detroit native, was influenced to go to Spelman after attending Mercy High School, an all-girls, Catholic college preparatory school. With Spelman’s sisterhood and the College’s reputation for producing Black, female doctors, Fields-Lever acknowledged that none of her professional success or accolades would be possible without the foundation she received at her “beloved Spelman.”

“I loved the sisterhood,” said Fields-Lever. “The way each of us helped each other and studied together, and our desire to be the best was what I also wanted for college; that helped shaped me. Being around others who wanted to be doctors really increased my ambition and helped me maintain that drive.”

Spelman mentors like former biology professor Dr. Latanya Hammonds-Odie, C’89, and Dr. Barbara Bell, retired director of the Spelman College Health Careers Program, encouraged those ambitions and dreams.
Bell remembered her mentee as a good student who supported the Health Careers Program and always took advantage of available opportunities.

“Karen knew what Spelman could offer, and she was determined to pursue her dreams,” recalled Bell. “I’m so proud of her. She has the warm demeanor and persona of a dentist, and she’s a wonderful parent and wife.”

Hammonds-Odie echoed those sentiments.

“Karen is dynamic, focused and caring,” she said. “She thrived and grew at Spelman with the sisterhood and friendly competition. As her mentor and former professor, I’m proud to have helped her reach her professional goal to be a physician. I’m very proud to be her big Spelman sister.”

Fields-Lever’s biggest supporter, by far, is DeJuan Lever, her husband of eight years. A loving and devoted husband and father, Lever helped establish the practice and serves as managing partner.

“I help manage my wife’s empire, and like our pastor, the Rev. Charles Jenkins of Fellowship Chicago Church says, ‘She’s the boss, but I’m in charge,’” Lever said with a chuckle. “I make sure that whatever she wants, I execute and make it happen. I take pride in that. But again, I always emphasize, this is her company. I’m just the support system.”

Still, Fields-Lever shares that Lever is the glue that holds it all together.

“It’s a lot of Jesus, a lot of pacing myself and it’s my support system,” said Fields-Lever, who earned her doctorate of dental surgery degree from Howard University. “It’s also my husband because he keeps me organized. Utilizing that other extra hand keeps me balanced and helps me stay focused.

As a mom, wife and caretaker, I’m a true giver. I think with my heart sometimes, but I don’t think that’s a bad thing. It’s what God would want us to do.”

Alicia Sands Lurry is a writer, communications, and public engagement officer.

“I LOVED THE SISTERHOOD. THE WAY EACH OF US HELPED EACH OTHER AND STUDIED TOGETHER, AND OUR DESIRE TO BE THE BEST WAS WHAT I ALSO WANTED FOR COLLEGE; THAT HELPED SHAPED ME.”

— DR. KAREN FIELDS-LEVER
Ashley Lamothe, C’2006, the owner of a thriving Chick-fil-A restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, understands the power of positive influence.

It was an influential conversation with the owner of the Chick-fil-A restaurant where she worked while attending Spelman College that first opened her eyes to the possibilities of entrepreneurship.

“When I was 15, I started working at a Chick-fil-A near my home to earn money for a car,” said Lamothe, 33, a native of Marietta, Georgia. “But, I ended up really loving the company, so when I came to Spelman, I worked all four years at a Chick-fil-A near campus.”

Lamothe, who dreamed of a career in theater, quickly moved up the ranks at the Northside Parkway restaurant — from team member, to supervisor, to assistant manager. Then one day, owner Jason Bilotti told her he had noticed her skill and enjoyment in leading people and asked if she might be interested in making an even greater impact as a Chick-fil-A franchisee.

“I liked working with my team — setting goals and celebrating with them when we achieved those goals — but I had never thought about being a franchisee,” said Lamothe. “I never saw myself doing that until Jason said it.”

What Bilotti saw in Lamothe was someone who had the potential to excel at a company that sets extremely high standards for its restaurant owners.

“She was a leader — meaning that people wanted to follow her — and she loved and believed in the brand,” said Bilotti, who owns two Chick-fil-A restaurants in metropolitan Atlanta. “The company values results and relationships. Some of our leaders are stronger in one than the other. Ashley is strong in both.”

Inspired to pursue a new career path, Lamothe changed her major from theater to economics. After graduating from Spelman, she applied and was accepted into Chick-fil-A’s franchisee development program.

In 2011, Lamothe became the owner of a Chick-fil-A restaurant across the street from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles — making her, at the time, the company’s youngest African-American female franchisee.

“I LEARNED ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE AT SPELMAN. I ALSO LEARNED ABOUT MYSELF.”
— ASHLEY LAMOTHE
This past April, Lamothe transferred to a new Chick-fil-A restaurant in downtown LA — a location she wanted because of her “heart and passion” for that neighborhood. She oversaw the opening of the restaurant, where she leads a team of 70-80 people, mostly high school and college students.

“When I think about what I do, I’m not in the chicken business, I’m in the people business,” she said. “I know the power of influence and how being in a positive environment helped shape the kind of leader I am today. So, I work to create an environment where people are well taken care of in terms of pay and benefits — and where they are encouraged to pursue their dreams.”

Lamothe’s commitment to her team and restaurant earned her a place in Chick-fil-A’s 2016 Champion’s Club, which honors franchisees who demonstrate outstanding performance in both sales and profitability.

“The business is 24/7, even though we are not open 24/7,” she said. “Mentally, I am always thinking about the business, on the business, and for the business.”

Still, Lamothe manages to carve out time to be active in the community. She volunteers with the Spelman Alumnae Chapter in Los Angeles, and Hollywood Young Life, a Christian discipleship organization for teens.

“I learned about the importance of service at Spelman,” said Lamothe. “I also learned about myself. I had four years to reflect on who I am and work through the type of person I want to be. It wasn’t until I got to Spelman — with people who look like me, who challenged me — that I learned to be my best self.”

Lamothe’s best is still unfolding. After a year of being in the news and social media spotlight surrounding the opening of the new restaurant, she is carefully considering her future.

“I see myself being able to influence on a larger scale,” said Lamothe, who is expecting her first child in the fall. “I will always do what I do with the restaurant, but I want to explore how to reach more people, to expand my platform. I see an opportunity to share my story and values, and how I have been successful.”

Adrienne S. Harris is an Atlanta-based strategy and communications consultant.

Eumeko Fuller-Barrow, C’95, has a track record of success in achieving her dreams. So, it’s no surprise that she loves her job helping others achieve theirs, too.

As senior lead adviser for Franchisee Recruitment for Chick-fil-A, Fuller-Barrow develops and executes the strategy to attract candidates from the Midwest and West to the company’s franchise opportunity.

“I help people realize their dreams of business ownership,” said Fuller-Barrow, a new mom, who lives and works in Atlanta. “I make people aware of opportunities in the company’s emerging markets and introduce them to the franchise selection process.”

The process to become a Chick-fil-A franchisee is quite competitive. In 2017, almost 50,000 people expressed interest; fewer than 150 were selected as franchise owners.

“We are looking for people with an entrepreneurial spirit and a willingness to serve — both customers and the people they lead,” she said. “It’s not one-size-fits-all with those characteristics. They manifest differently in different people.”

Fuller-Barrow joined Chick-fil-A in 2013, well after fellow Spelman alumna Ashley Lamothe, C’2006, had become a restaurant owner. As part of her recruitment strategy for new franchisees, Fuller-Barrow has enlisted Lamothe to share her experiences and advice with those who are considering the same career path.

“Knowing she was my Spelman sister, I reached out to her to be a guest speaker at some events to raise awareness about opportunities among Spelman and Morehouse alumni,” said Fuller-Barrow. “We have done several events together in California and Chicago.”

Fuller-Barrow could not be more well-qualified to identify candidates who fit the bill as prospective Chick-fil-A franchisees. After earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology and Spanish from Spelman, she went on to earn two master’s degrees — one in industrial organizational psychology and one in business administration. Then, in 2017, she achieved a long-held dream she is most proud of — completion of a doctorate in business and industrial organizational psychology.

“My parents, especially my mother, planted a seed in me to pursue excellence. I found that attending Spelman was a natural progression of that pursuit,” said Fuller-Barrow, who participated in a pre-professional training program with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, having been invited by Arthur Mitchell during her senior year at Spelman.

“I could not imagine having gone anywhere else,” she said. “Spelman has been a great influence along the way in my life and career and being a leader at Chick-fil-A, which has a culture of servant leadership.” — ASH
Fallon Wilson’s first name derives from an Irish word that means leader, and the quirky, take-charge spirit is proving to live up to her namesake.

Wilson, 35, along with partners Jurnell Cockhren and Jarrett Strickland, are co-founders of Black in Tech Nashville, an organization focused on educating citizens to thrive in the tech industry’s burgeoning space. It is currently a private Facebook group with over 450 members that will launch its web platform in January 2019.

Spelman College serves as Wilson’s business muse. Citing her alma mater’s celebration of Black “race women” inspired her to co-found BTN. It’s an “homage to Spelman’s investment in me,” she said.

The Houston native earned her bachelor’s degree in political science and government from Spelman in 2005, and both her master’s in political science and a doctorate in social service administration from the University of Chicago in 2007 and 2015, respectively.

Wilson calls herself a public interest technologist, someone who navigates the tech world without a tech degree.

“We need [more] people who [can] operate at the intersection of tech, data research and community engagement,” said Wilson, who serves as BTN’s CEO. “My goal is to curate and connect people, institutions, policy, and funding to support the development of a local Black tech ecosystem.”

In addition to BTN, Wilson is research director for Chicago-based Black Tech Mecca, a data-driven think tank focused on the collective power of the Black tech community. Led by CEO and co-founder Fabian Elliott, the nonprofit organization assesses cities’ commitments and investments in developing and scaling thriving Black tech ecosystems.

“Fabian saw my work in Nashville and asked if I could help do similar work nationally with other cities, and I said yes,” she said. “Black Tech Mecca is dedicated to creating equity
in the realms of K-12, higher education, diversity and inclusion in tech companies and companies with growing IT workforces, and in supporting the growth of Black tech startups.”

In August 2017, BTN and Wilson hosted Nashville’s first Tech Inclusion Nashville, a daylong conference highlighting diversity inequities in the tech industry. The 200+ stakeholders included nonprofits and universities, Google Fiber Nashville, BNY Mellon, Social Ventures at Vanderbilt University and the Nashville Technology Council. “I am blessed to be able to do both local and national Black tech ecosystem building,” said Wilson, who admits in a cover story in the Nashville Post techie magazine these efforts are just not enough to make significant change.

However, she is persistent. Wilson has also launched Nashville’s first citywide assessment survey of Black technologists and public interest technologists’ perceptions of diversity and inclusion in local tech spaces.

BTN likewise leverages member links to Nashville tech-related firms. Since BTN’s founding, its members have joined the boards of the Nashville Technology Council, Metro Nashville Public Schools STEAM Advisory Board, and other tech groups.

One supporter, The Kapor Center for Social Impact, funds Wilson’s research into understanding “how social service-based tech careers, civic tech, and government tech careers are a path into tech for students who look like me.”

Another backer, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, has created metrics and methodologies to support the development of Black tech founders.

After prodding, Wilson gives BTN a “B” for its second year’s efforts. She said BTN is establishing a foundation to build equity for Nashville’s marginalized neighborhoods and will develop a Digital Inclusion oversight organization, she said.

Along with partnering with Black Tech Mecca’s city assessment tool, BTN will host Black-focused tech meet-ups to build equity to benchmark growth in Black communities.

Prior to BTN’s founding, Nashville’s mayor had tapped Wilson to co-chair the Connected Nashville Smart City report. In concert with the American Baptist College, a local HBCU, and Wilson’s former employer, BTN set up a program to honor Metro Nashville Public Schools’ graduating seniors. At the event, Jaime Caspar, Google’s Chief Education Evangelist, advised graduates to pursue technology careers.

Wilson has also researched and co-chaired Nashville’s first Smart City report. It clarified the need to organize the Black community — for example, founding BTN to exploit the strategies and opportunities written in the Smart City report.

In 2017, Wilson received the Digital Equity Network Award from the International Society of Technology in Education. As a self-proclaimed public interest technologist, she spends her time discussing issues of race, gender, faith and digital equity.

She was also selected as a 2017 Nashville Women to Watch and as a Nashville Cable 2018 Power of Inclusion awardee.

Follow Fallon Wilson on Twitter @SistahWilson, and BTN on Facebook: facebook.com/BlackInTechNashville.

Frank McCoy is executive producer of STEMRules.com.