



Felicia Davis (1965-Present)

Director

Building Green Initiative

“Follow your passion, no matter how narrow or odd it may seem.” Felicia Davis, 2005.

Overview

Felicia M. Davis, directs the Building Green Initiative housed at Clark Atlanta University within the Atlanta University Center-the largest consortium of historically black colleges and universities in the nation. Created by UNCF, the program advances green building and other sustainability efforts at historically black, Hispanic-serving and tribal colleges and universities. Davis is committed to helping Black colleges and other special mission institutions make the transition to a more environmentally and economically sustainable future. She managed the 2014 UNCF/Toyota sponsored Green Ambassador program with student green ambassadors on 27 HBCU campuses. A staunch advocate for measurable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through energy efficiency retrofits, green building and an array of sustainable practices, creating an HBCU Green Fund is among her highest priorities. She also coordinates the AUC Vine City EcoDistrict Planning Process, a multi-stakeholder tool for developing sustainable, resilient cities by focusing on neighborhoods to engage residents in making their communities places that work now and for future generations.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life and Education

To describe Felicia Davis’ career simply as “environmental” would be misleading. Davis has always pursued work that combines her particular skills and talents with opportunities to further social justice. Within the environmental community, she has found a niche and has continued to grow, contribute and make a genuine difference.

As a child growing up in Englewood, New Jersey, Davis was greatly influenced by her grandmother, who she describes as an environmentalist and conservationist. Davis says her grandmother’s flower and vegetable gardens were known throughout the community; she also composted and recycled everything, repaired items rather than replaced them, and had the lowest amount of trash of anyone Davis has ever

known. Her grandmother's care for the environment had a tremendous impact on Davis' relationship with the natural world.

Davis feels that she had the best childhood possible. The eldest of three children, Davis' mother, Barbara, was a nurse; her father, Lee, is a retired GM union laborer, historian, and a life-long student of the African Diaspora. She describes Englewood, a suburb of New York City, as a wonderfully diverse community where everyone knew everyone. The schools were desegregated as she grew up, and Davis feels she received a solid K-12 education that provided her with a basis to do anything she wanted. Despite her suburban upbringing, Davis remembers many childhood experiences in the natural world, such as hiking, camping, and fishing, as well as urban, cultural experiences like going to the symphony and museums. Davis says living right outside of one of the world's greatest cities encouraged her to become fearless in traveling the world, through which she was able to gain a unique perspective on the planet and her place on it.

Career

Along the way, she completed a Bachelor of Arts in political science, a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Graduate Fellowship and a Master's in Public Administration at Howard University, and a year of law school at Georgetown University. Seeking to become an agent for change, Davis has worked with advancement programs for women and minorities in higher education, academic support programs for minority engineering and computer science students, and community relations and outreach for a county government. Decades after completing her degrees, the potential for significant advances in energy production that could also eliminate extreme poverty in Africa, and dramatically restructure the global economy, made the Ozone Action mission to stop global warming irresistible to her. Diving into the environmental movement after years of social justice advocacy ultimately led to her gaining a deeper appreciation for environmental justice concerns. Through those efforts, Davis devoted significant attention to building and repairing bridges between mainstream and environmental justice advocates.

Davis served as director of the Georgia Airkeepers, where she worked with Working with Ozone Action, Greenpeace USA, and the Clean Air Campaign. The Airkeeper coalition included the venerable Southern Organizing Committee, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Georgia PIRG, and Georgians for Clean Energy. "It was important to take our message to the community. I was determined to implement a real grassroots campaign," observed Davis. This work culminated in the publication of the *Air of Injustice Report on African Americans and Power Plant Pollution*.

As a founding member of DogonVillage.com, the oldest African American-owned online community created in 1995 to "bridge the digital divide," Davis has set up three eco-cyber centers in Senegal, Ghana, and Durban, South Africa. In keeping with the mission of Dogon Village, and in collaboration with the Benjamin E. Mays National Educational Resource Center, the eco-cyber centers were built to help connect the African Diaspora and to get African communities online. The idea for the centers came out of a conversation that Davis had while in Africa to make a presentation on climate change; she found that many rural, African communities had problems with solid waste and air quality, and were plagued by a lack of information because they did not have access to the Internet. The eco-cyber centers were designed to bring computer technology, Internet access, and environmental education to these communities, as well as to foster an exchange between youth in Africa and the United States.

The eco-cybercenter concept was incubated in the community technology center established by Davis and Melvin Morris outside of Atlanta. After securing one of the first America Online PowerUp technology grants and setting up the computer center, it became clear that connecting with the outdoors was an even greater need for urban youth than access to technology. Introducing youth to environmental education is a growing passion for Davis. Her greatest mentorship role, however, is as inspiration to her 17-year-old daughter, Illai Kenney. Following in her mother's footsteps of civic activism, Kenney co-founded Georgia Kids Against Pollution at twelve, and in 2003 was the recipient of one of the Brower Youth Awards. Kenney is also a national youth leader for the Black Youth Vote Kids, and was the youngest delegate to the UN World Conference on Sustainable Development.

Davis currently works for the Georgia Conservancy as program manager for Mothers & Others for Clean Air, a partnership uniting health and environmental organizations to make connections between air quality and health issues. Her goal in this partnership is to increase awareness of the relevant issues, and mobilize constituencies to become active—through both personal initiatives and policy advocacy—in the effort to improve air quality.

Environmental justice remains a priority for Davis, and she has become a member of the Environmental Justice Climate Change Initiative (EJCC), a national group focusing on domestic and international equity issues related to climate policy. With the EJCC, Davis studies the full range of impacts that climate change has on low-income and people of color, and points to Hurricane Katrina as a prime example of disproportionate climate impact.

Locally, Davis chairs the environmental justice committee for the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda, a progressive coalition that works on social justice issues. She is also a member of the Keeping It Wild steering committee, a very diverse group dedicated to conservation and promotion of wilderness appreciation. She notes that encouraging people of color to explore nature and environmental opportunities is a natural outgrowth of previous work.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Davis cites Dr. Joseph Lowery and Ms. Donna Shavlik as two of the most important influences on her career and activism. She owes a lot to the mentorship of Dr. Lowery, who is the President of the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda, as well as the President Emeritus of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; he motivated her to devote her organizational and analytical skills to helping expand what Lowery calls "the community of conscience." She has benefited greatly from the experience of this wise elder of the Civil Rights movement. Donna Shavlik was Davis' first supervisor when she worked for the American Council on Education. Davis describes Shavlik as "a seeker of truth" who thoroughly understood the gender-power dynamic, and who always introduced her to others as a colleague, thereby creating opportunities that would never have existed otherwise.

Highlights

As for career highlights, Davis says she is most proud to have been a part of the campaign to reauthorize Title IX, and she still believes that the growing involvement of women in all areas of leadership—especially in the environmental arena—is critical. She is also proud to have been a part of global work on the

Women's Decade Conferences. Participating in the UN World Conferences on Racism (Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance) and Sustainable Development also constitute highlights due to the caliber of the meetings, the surrounding activities, and the fact that it brought together organized, experienced, knowledgeable people of color to share ideas with each other.

Challenges

Davis has had her fair share of challenges, having survived the Malibu forest fire and Northridge earthquake. She is now deeply disturbed by current events, and believes greater destruction is inevitable if major changes are not undertaken soon. "Habitat destruction, population growth, materialistic applications of science and technology, weapons of mass destruction, and the erosion of the moral fabric of society spell doom unless we can return to our most fundamental lesson, which to me is stewardship and all that it implies," she says. Responding to the recent devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, Davis points out that we have not equipped the next generation well to deal with catastrophic events. "We are racing past the point of no return. Global climate change is already having catastrophic impacts upon the poor and people of color globally," she says.

Davis cites the poor education that children receive in the public school system as a continuing career low point. She finds the lack of environmental education, and "testing instead of teaching", incredibly frustrating as both a parent and an environmentalist. "People know next to nothing about our natural environment," Davis says. "Our young people will have to start over if our [natural] systems cannot recover."

Advice to Young Professionals

Davis takes every opportunity to encourage minorities to pursue environmental careers, in part because she believes it is a field where individuals can pursue virtually any area of interest. "Follow your passion," she advises, "no matter how narrow or odd it might seem. Know that mastery does take time; take every opportunity to put your knowledge and understanding to the test and to work." Davis' great hope is that people of color look to some of the environmental careers that are considered mainstream. She believes that it is all about who has been exposed to particular fields in the past, and that it is not necessarily a function of race. "Many people never encounter many of the areas that might attract them, or are discouraged at an early age because they grow up in dull academic environments or in urban areas with no access to nature in the wild," Davis reflects. She says the need for environmental professionals will only increase as environmental problems grow more pressing, and the need for diverse leadership is more crucial than ever.