

Local News

BREAKING GLASS CEILINGS: MAYOR CANTRELL ON HER XAVIER DAYS AND LEGACY



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In 1990, LaToya Cantrell moved to New Orleans to attend Xavier University of Louisiana. The 18-year-old California-native was new to the city as she had only visited once before while on a road trip with her grandmother at age 16.

As Cantrell spent her college years earning a sociology degree, she fell in love with not only Xavier, but the city as well, saying that she “found her soul in New Orleans.” Two decades later, Cantrell’s love for New Orleans put her on a life path to become the first woman in the city’s 300-year history to serve as mayor in 2017.

“I showed up with everything that I needed to be successful,” Cantrell said about when she first arrived at Xavier. “I just needed to immerse myself in the environment to learn, and the [school] leadership provided that every step of the way,” she said.

Fond moments of finding a community on and off campus and building long-lasting relationships come to mind when she looks back on her time at Xavier. One of those relationships being with her mentor and former sociology professor, Dr. Silas Lee.

“Xavier is a very good mentoring ground for exposure and development of students who have shown how they transition from academic to professional in a personal way that represents the mission of Xavier,” Lee said.

Lee, a sociology and political science professor, has seen multiple students throughout his 34 years at Xavier. Many of his former students have gone on to fill various positions in public life.

“She was a very socially-conscious student who focused on social justice and social issues,” Lee said, “which is parallel to what she has demonstrated in her career path, focusing on social justice, economic and social inequity.”

Social justice and community work began Mayor Cantrell’s entrance into public office. After graduating from Xavier, she and her husband settled in New Orleans’ Broadmoor neighborhood where she became an active member of her community.

“It was showing up. It was me doing the work, getting results, and building relationships with people that saw more in me and encouraged me,” Cantrell said.

Following the devastation of the city by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Cantrell led neighborhood redevelopment efforts as president of the Broadmoor Improvement Association. However, she shared that she never set out to run for public office. It was only after she was encouraged by members of her community that Cantrell successfully ran for the District-B City Council seat in 2012.

While on the City Council, Cantrell introduced bills to ban smoking in food establishments and combat the city’s housing crisis. In March 2017, she declared her candidacy for mayor and broke the glass ceiling with her historic win on Nov. 18, 2017.

On May 7, 2018, Mayor Cantrell was inaugurated as not only the city’s first woman mayor, but first Black woman mayor. She also became the first person born outside of New Orleans



Mayor LaToya Cantrell Photo by Tyler Hailstork

to hold the position since former Mayor Victor Schiro in 1961. In November 2021, she made history again when she was re-elected for a second term in office.

“It’s something that I’m proud of, being able to demonstrate that a Black woman can shoulder the burden of leadership and lead an urban city,” Cantrell said.

Since taking office, she has led the city through the COVID-19 pandemic, which she pointed out as some of her toughest days in office. She

focused on protecting the lives of residents from the deadly virus, even if it meant shutting down many of the events the city is best known for.

She has taken in all the criticisms in stride – folks who petition for a recall, those who were upset that she cancelled Mardi Gras in 2021, and others who blame her for the crime rates.

“As a Black female mayor, when that honeymoon period was over, the first opportunity they got when she put her foot down about

something that she truly believed in, she was pretty much chastised for,” said Dr. Pamela Waldron-Moore, a political science and women studies professor in her 25th year at Xavier. Waldron-Moore noted that Black women in office face the intersection of both their race and gender in how people view them as leaders in public office. This intersection is amplified in how they are covered in the mainstream media.

“If critics continue to see race as the first thing

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MAYOR CANTRELL CONTINUED

about any executive, any city official, any state official,” Waldron-Moore said, “there will always be a problem with people who look like LaToya Cantrell.”

Many of these patterns, Waldron-Moore noted, can be linked to why there is a small number of Black women serving as mayors in the 100 largest cities in America. Of those 100 cities, only eight are led by Black women mayors including San Francisco, Chicago, Baton Rouge, Washington, D.C.; Charlotte, N.C.; and New Orleans.

Mayor Cantrell has also acknowledged how her identity plays a role in the criticism she receives.

“Being in this role and being a Black woman, it seems no matter how you do the work and get results, you’re always second guessed every step,” Cantrell said. “While you can point to results, with each challenge, it’s like you have to start all over again with proving you can do the job.”

She credits how she handles any critics to the

vulnerability and confidence in knowing who she is - two lessons she learned during her years at Xavier.

“It starts with knowing who you are in the midst of any adversity, you just stay focused, and not accept other people’s opinions about who you are,” Cantrell said. “If you’re doing the right thing and for the right reasons, then it’s going to be okay. ‘This too shall pass.’”

As Mayor Cantrell looks ahead to achieve her goals during her last term in office as mayor, she says that she is not focused on what she will do once she leaves office. But as part of the small group of Black women serving as mayors in major cities, Mayor Cantrell knows she will leave a legacy behind for other Black women in the years to come.

“It’s very gratifying to know that I won’t be the last,” Cantrell said.

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Mayor LaToya Cantrell (center) and Xavier students at MLK Day of Service 2020
Photo courtesy of Xavier University of Louisiana

Mayor’s Favorites

Q: What’s your favorite decade of music?
The 1980s

Q: We know you like to dance, but what else do you do for fun?
I like to cook with my daughter.

Q: What’s your favorite New Orleans dish?
My favorite New Orleans dish is gumbo, but not mine!

Q: Who is one person you wish you could meet, dead or alive?
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Q: If you weren’t in politics, what would you be doing?
If I wasn’t in politics, I would probably be a police officer.

Q: What’s the last movie that made you cry?
The last movie that made me cry was *When They See Us* on Netflix.



by **Jordan Booker**
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It has been six years since Eric Holder has held the position of U.S. Attorney General. But he feels compelled to still engage in civic life after holding national office. In his new book “Our Unfinished March: The Violent Past and Imperiled Future of the Vote - A History, A Crisis, A Plan,” he shared that his sole purpose is to keep the fight for voting rights front and center in American consciousness.

“We have got to recognize that the power still resides with us, and especially with young people,” Holder told the graduating class of 2023 and first year students

FORMER U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC HOLDER CALLS ON XAVIERITES TO DO THEIR CIVIC DUTY

who attended Founder’s Day Convocation on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022. “You all are now the largest voting bloc in this country, you have the greatest power as a bloc than any other bloc in this country and yet you don’t exercise that power,” Holder said.

Social justice work is not new to Holder, who clerked with NAACP Legal Defense Fund while in law school. His career in the public eye spanned over four decades and three administrations. He hoped to inspire students to take on a life of public service.

“Thank you especially for your work in recent years ... defending suffrage in the United States and helping us understand why it’s an essential element of our democracy,” said Xavier President Dr. Reynold Verret.

Holder said now he dedicates his time to continue

fighting for voting access and using his platform to educate Americans on this issue. From being a correspondent on CNN to engaging younger voters directly, he hopes that his insights as the former Attorney General will encourage

citizens to remain vigilant about their rights. Holder left the students with a call to action to secure their future and to get involved in protecting the rights of the next generation.

“You’re the leaders

of this country going forward and unless you all dedicate yourselves to making this country better it’s not going to happen. You can’t wait for other people, the cavalry is not coming. You all are the cavalry,” Holder said.



President Reynold C. Verret (left) and Former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder
Photo by Mark Veals