

Women of Substance

*Two strong
but gentle
women crusade
for education.*

You can feel good about the next generation of the South with Clyda Rent and Johnnetta Cole sculpting the path to higher learning. Join us as we meet these leaders we're proud to call our own.

Novice pilot Clyda S. Rent sat in the T-37 cockpit under gravity great enough to gyrate *Top Gun* types. She threw caution—and the jet—to the wind, throttling into stomach-lurching 360-degree flips. The Mississippi University for Women (MUW) president had eagerly accepted when neighboring Columbus Air Force Base offered the joyride.

"Clyda Rent must thrive on challenges," *The Charlotte Observer* wrote in

1989 when she left a vice presidency at Queens College to become Mississippi's first female university president. At Queens, she researched, proposed, and founded new graduate and MBA programs, doubling enrollment. "The W," as it's called, had been threatened with closing, but she concentrated on the 110-year-old school's strengths.

"You've got remarkable alums," notes

Clyda, 55, who graduated valedictorian from Paxon High School in Jacksonville, Florida, then earned bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees in history and sociology, with a special emphasis in demogra-

phy from Florida State University (FSU). She and her husband, George, whom she met in graduate school, cofounded the sociology department at Western Carolina University.

**For all serious
daring starts
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*Eudora Welty,
MUW alumna*

magazines, and named FSU's "Grad Made Good," the only former homecoming queen at FSU so honored. Harvard University uses her inaugural speech to train new college presidents.

Yet, she professes to be shy. "You can ask my family," says Clyda, referring to George, a Mississippi State University administrator, and Cason, their 28-year-old daughter. "But I believe in one of my favorite sayings: If you can dream it, you can do it."

Clyda had the following words from Eudora Welty engraved at Welty Hall: "For all serious daring starts from within." That's true, says the shy woman who flies jets and champions universities. "But it is preceded by people nurturing you, challenging you, and helping you do things you didn't think you could do." That's the gift she wants "The W" to bestow on its students.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

After just moments with Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, you understand why she is lovingly known as America's "Sister President." Johnnetta, the first female African American president of Atlanta's Spelman College, the country's oldest Black women's college, is a sister to every student—past, present, and future.

"She was approachable and accessible at every level," a recent graduate recalls. "She was never too busy being president to listen to the concerns of a Spelman sister."

As she speaks, her energy fills the room. "I believe passionately in the potential of my sisters," she begins. "And I know education is the way not only for young women to reach their potential but also for menfolk to understand the importance of all of us getting there."

Johnnetta's vision provides that every woman has the opportunity to follow her passion. "I've helped the world

meet and fall in love with a very special place. And I've helped Spelman women understand their responsibility to that world." A gift of \$20 million from her friends Bill and Camille Cosby ignited Johnnetta's fundraising efforts for the college. By establishing relationships between Spelman and the corporate world, she increased the school's endowment from \$41 million to \$147 million.

The Oberlin College graduate earned an M.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology from Northwestern University. At 60, this author of two anthropology texts is a spellbinding speaker with an infectious air of hope. She guides and inspires with hard work, hugs, and great expectations. She asks difficult questions and challenges all women to confront sexism and racism.

Johnnetta left Spelman in June after 10 years. "[The presidency] was sacred work, it was joyous work, but it was tough work. It was my dream job," she reflects. "I think part of it was that I came knowing when I would have to go." She looks forward to a one-year sabbatical before she begins teaching anthropology at Emory University.

The commitment to this journey began in Jacksonville, Florida, where, as the daughter of affluent parents, she saw how resources could help others. "Those who have been fortunate need to reach out and make ourselves part of somebody else's family," she says.

Despite stints at Washington State University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Hunter College at City University of New York, her heart is here. "I love the South at its best—so warm, so open, so gracious, and so compassionate. I don't think I could love all that if I didn't know the South in its antitheses—when it's cold, not by weather but by attitudes and behavior."

Typically she looks ahead. "I'm ready to teach in a way I've never taught before," Johnnetta says. "I want to have the disturbing and satisfying experience that comes when I write. There ought to be a lot of things to write that I had no idea about 10 years ago."

Andria Scott Hurst



I believe passionately in the potential of my sisters.

*Johnnetta Cole,
former president,
Spelman College*

"The W" alumni include author Eudora Welty, Mississippi Supreme Court justice Lenore Prather, and the mothers of Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner. "You have a very distinguished campus [24 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places]," Clyda continues. "And it's always been known as a place that emphasizes teaching and academic excellence."

First, she revamped the publications and curriculum to include women's studies. Her slogan "Mississippi University for Women—And Smart Men, Too" welcomes both genders. Enrollment soared from 2,000 to 3,200 students. Next came campus rejuvenation. "The dining hall still had shag carpet," she shudders. Capital improvement projects on campus totaled over \$30 million under Clyda's guidance.

Then, another political attempt arose to kill "The W." Protesting alumni and

friends, called "Clyda's Commandos," blitzed the media. Clyda even guided the deciding judge around the newly spruced-up campus. He concluded that it's a jewel. For three years, *U.S. News & World Report* has agreed, ranking it "Best Value" among 126 Southern liberal arts schools.

When state funding dropped, Clyda recruited help from corporate contacts, expanding endowments from \$4.9 million to \$12.6 million. She called attention to "The W" by bringing in renowned speakers, such as authors John Grisham and Fannie Flagg, Senator Howard Baker, correspondent Judy Woodruff, and *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth.

"The W" would not exist without the tireless efforts of Clyda Rent," says Frances Ledyard Ivy, former alumni president. Clyda has been noted by both *Working Woman* and *Mirabella*



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Clyda Rent,
president, Mississippi
University for Women