

60 years at VSU

Evelyn Watkins

BY MARKUS SCHMIDT (STAFF WRITER) THE PROGRESS INDEX
Published: August 8, 2011



In her six decades at Virginia State University (VSU), Evelyn Watkins Jemison has taught so many students that she can't even estimate the number. "It must have been in the thousands, and many of them became professionals in medicine, dentistry, optometry and even government officials and other leaders," she said.

On Saturday, Jemison celebrated her 90th birthday at the new Gateway Dining Hall on the same campus where she started to educate and impact the lives of so many by teaching undergraduate students and master's degree graduates. To this day, she is the only woman in the history of VSU to receive the rank of full professor without a Ph.D.

Jemison was born Aug. 6, 1921, in north Alabama. "I was lucky to be born in the Tennessee Valley," she said, laughing.

Jemison spent the first years of her life on the farm of her paternal grandparents, who had 14 children. "They were free

slaves during the Civil War and my grandfather served as a railroad worker," she said. Life on the farm was carefree, in spite of the Great Depression.

"They had at least 20 acres of land and we never had to worry about meat or vegetables, because it was all there," she said. Jemison remembers treats like special popcorn and days spent by the Tennessee River. When she was 4 years old, her father bought his family a home in Tusculum, Ala. Jemison knew at a young age that she wanted to go to college. Her mother, a Tuskegee graduate, made education a priority in the family.

"Sometimes she patched up our clothes instead of buying new ones, because we had to save money for college," she said. Her father's last words, she remembers, were words of concern over the family's struggle with paying middle school tuition for Jemison's sister.

Aspiring to become a medical doctor or a science teacher, Jemison enrolled at Talladega College, graduating in 1942 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in biology and mathematics. Jemison hit the ground running, embarking on a successful career in science education, serving as the chair of the Science Department of Fairfield High School from 1942 until 1943.

Jemison also became politically involved. As soon as she turned 21, she registered to vote. "I don't remember who I voted for, and I don't want to remember, because I know I didn't like him," she said. "But my father always taught us that we had to go to school and we had to go vote, and that's what I did." Jemison also became a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People while continuing her education, receiving a master of science in embryology from Howard University in 1946, where she also served as an instructor in comparative anatomy.

In the same year, she married James David Jemison, M.B.A. Soon after the wedding, Jemison went to become chair of the biology department at Storer College.

In 1950, the couple moved to Petersburg when James Jemison was offered a job as bookkeeper

at Virginia State College. Evelyn also found a job at the college, teaching biology. "When I came here, I came into a rich environment," she said. "I liked it from the start."

Throughout the years, Jemison quickly moved through the ranks. Her associated responsibilities included thesis and graduate professor, genetics and embryology. She was a funded researcher, health science coordinator and also served as director of the VSU sickle cell program for 20 years. She lectured at the Mathematics and Science Center of Virginia and worked as visiting scientist at Talladega College.

In the 1970s, Jemison traveled to Japan and China with a delegation of biotechnology professors. By the time she officially retired in 1986, she was a full professor. But her career in education didn't end with retirement. In the 1990s, she was part of a delegation to South Africa to study integration at universities.

To this day, Jemison spends much time on campus in Ettrick. "This is my first year of not tutoring genetics here at VSU," she said, smiling. And after witnessing the growth of VSU over six decades, Jemison is happy with what she sees. "I am pleased that VSU has met the challenges of being underfunded and others," she said. "And I am also pleased with what I feel the new administration will do for VSU."

In 2008, Jemison met then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, when he stopped in Petersburg at Longstreet's Deli for a cheeseburger after speaking at John Tyler Community College. Jemison couldn't help but give the political hopeful some advice on her own. "I told him that he should work with the No Child Left Behind Act that President Bush had implemented," she said. "I also told him that the government should work with veterans for at least a year after they come home."

Has Obama fulfilled her expectations? "With all that he is confronted with, I think he is doing a fine job," Jemison said. "Many people can't stand the fact that a black man is president. But it is time for us to come together."

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