INSPIRE

“My Friends, My Friends”: Oswald P. Bronson, a Beacon of Light at Bethune-Cookman

DR. OSWALD BRONSON, SR., PRESIDENT OF BETHUNE-COOKMAN COLLEGE, MARCH 22, 1995.

DR. OSWALD P. BRONSON, SR., PRESIDENT OF BETHUNE-COOKMAN COLLEGE, WALKS ACROSS THE CAMPUS WITH FORMER U.S. REP. CORINNE BROWN AND THE REV. JESSE JACKSON DURING A VISIT TO THE CAMPUS ON OCT. 14, 1996.

DR. OSWALD BRONSON, SR., PRESIDENT OF BETHUNE-COOKMAN COLLEGE, JUNE 1, 2004.

DR. OSWALD BRONSON, SR., CONGRATULATES A STUDENT DURING A CONVOCATION.

A renowned educator, visionary administrator, well-respected theologian and celebrated community leader, Dr. Oswald Perry Bronson, Sr., led a life dedicated to service. His charismatic essence and warm embrace for all humanity continues to be recounted by his family, friends, former students, mentees and colleagues who shared in his 91 years of life.

In 1950, he earned his bachelor of science degree in social science from Bethune-Cookman College (now University) in Daytona Beach, FL. He completed studies for a bachelor of divinity degree at Gammon Theological Seminary (now part of UNCF's Interdenominational Theological Center, or ITC) in Atlanta, GA, in 1959. In 1965, he then earned a doctor of philosophy degree in religious and higher education from Northwestern University in Evanston, IL.

Dr. Bronson began his career in academia by serving as a lecturer and teacher in numerous mission schools, clinics, pastoral institutes and leadership training schools. He advanced from director of field education at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in 1964 to becoming vice president in 1966. Dr. Bronson ended his ITC tenure as president in 1975. While serving at ITC, he helped expand the number of denominational affiliations the seminary houses as part of its mission to foster ecumenical fellowship.

After completing his time at ITC, in 1975, Dr. Bronson began an appointment as the fourth president of his alma mater, Bethune-Cookman University, a position he held for 29 years. Dr. Bronson, like the university's

founder Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, wielded innate diplomacy, persuasive skills and canny collaboration to advance the institution and ensure more African American students had access to quality education.

Under his leadership, the university's enrollment grew from 1,520 students to 2,794, the endowment increased from $1 million to $28 million, and the operations budget went from $6.2 million to $51.4 million. Major fields of study at the institution increased from 12 to 37. Dr. Bronson spearheaded investments in faculty development, student achievement and retention. The physical appearance of the campus improved with 15 new buildings—most notably, the Mary McLeod Bethune Performing Arts Center.

After Dr. Bronson's retirement he was sought out by Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, FL, as its interim president where he served from 2005-2007. During his tenure at Edward Waters, he restored trust and increased academic integrity to ensure the institution's continued growth, securing nearly $6.4 million in federal grants and re-engaging stakeholders of the college. These actions led to him being deemed a "Turnaround President."

Dr. Bronson was on the forefront of civic engagement throughout his entire life. As a leader who espoused the values of Dr. Bethune, he marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and championed causes for equality and justice. Much of his life's work is memorialized in the book, *Chief Servant Leader: The Life and Leadership of Dr. Oswald P. Bronson, Sr., President of Bethune Cookman*.

Dr. Bronson received numerous distinguished awards and honors. Together with his wife, Helen Carolyn Williams Bronson, they impacted the lives of thousands of people in the communities in which they lived and served throughout the country. Dr. Bronson was regarded as a friend because he embraced everyone with whom he came in contact as "friends." In fact, a signature phrase in his formal and informal greeting was "my friends, my friends." And, at the very mention of those words, people became impassioned with gratitude for the authenticity of his delivery.

Dr. Bronson, just like many of the great UNCF HBCU leaders, is now missed by all those friends and the those whose lives he touched.