

INSPIRE

John and Sally Davenport: Legacy UNCF Donors Investing in HBCUs to Achieve a Better Future for America



For John and Sally Davenport, supporting UNCF and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is not merely the right thing to do. It's the critically important thing to do to erase racial inequities and help educate more people to build a better future for our nation.

The Massachusetts-based couple has been supporting UNCF since the 1980s. They both recall the iconic UNCF television commercials from the 1970s and 1980s and Lou Rawls championing the cause of UNCF and its world-renowned motto, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."[®]

UNCF's messaging made an impression on both of them. Sally spent time in advertising and said her father, also an advertiser, often spoke of the importance of messaging and told her the reason advertising companies

didn't go out of business during the Great Depression was enough because businesses understood the need for advertising. "The advertising business did not do too badly in the Depression because businesses knew that if they stopped advertising, they were dead," Sally recalled.

John said Lou Rawls was the man on TV who first introduced him to UNCF. "I probably wouldn't have heard of UNCF if it were not for him. He was the man."

Both John and Sally said their experiences growing up helped them to appreciate the value of Black higher education. Sally attended the all-women Smith College, learning firsthand how women could perform just as well as men in leadership positions. She said that she probably wouldn't have had those experiences if she had attended a co-ed college.

"So, from there, I gleaned the notion that a college for just women was very helpful in those days, the kind of pre feminist days because, as I'm always saying to John, 'You know, in a co-ed school, who is going to run the student government?' The answer is the guys! They are going to have the experience of going to law school and getting into graduate school," she said.

"At a woman's school, we ran the student government. So, I know there's a parallel with African American students. I realized that if there's a parallel, attending an African American school can be probably more helpful to African American students for their self-esteem, self-confidence and learning things that they might not have learned as a minority member of a White school."

When Sally graduated from Smith College, she went to work for the Anti-Defamation League in 1965. "I remember thinking in 1965, 'Why are we worried about prejudice? That should be over for African American people.' Well, I was proven wrong about that. And I think we've now all been awakened even beyond what I knew in those days about the problems of racism and inequality facing African Americans."

John recalled his student days at Amherst College. "Literally, there were three African American students in my class and no more than four or five in the entire student body. Today, Amherst has made great strides to diversify its student population. I am proud to say that most of the student body is now minority. The campus is diverse and with a different atmosphere, different everything," noted John.

After graduating from Amherst, John spent a year in the U.S Army. He would go on to practice law in Manhattan and later Boston before retiring in 1999. Today, in addition to supporting UNCF, he is a volunteer with an environmental advocacy group called the Conservation Law Foundation in all six New England states.

The Davenports believe that today there is an even greater need to support UNCF and its mission, which is also supported by their adult children.

“Given current attacks on our democracy and everything else that is going on in our society, we are hopeful that organizations like UNCF can make a difference and change perceptions about racial and economic equality,” said Sally. “Our kids are entirely on board. Education is certainly a big part of changing those perceptions.”

The Davenports only wish more of their friends would become donors. “It’s bad for society in general to have a segment of minds going to waste,” said Sally. “I can think of a couple of good friends to whom I would like to say, ‘You know, you’re not giving enough money away.’”

“UNCF can make the case far better than we can,” they both said. “We’re going to continue supporting your mission because it’s the right thing to do and our country desperately needs more educated men and women, both Black and White, to help our country overcome racial and economic disparities and build a better life experience for future generations.”

The Davenports are a true inspiration. Their selfless act of giving to UNCF to ensure that talented, deserving students of all backgrounds can get to and through college helps lead the way to better futures for us all.