

**Home**

Current Issue
Previous Issues
About This Newsletter
Where are you now?
In Memoriam
Faculty Home Page
Help Support our
Students' Dreams

[Home](#) > [Spring & Summer 2007](#) > Standing on U of A Shoulders

Standing on U of A Shoulders

by Scott Rollans

"The purpose of education is to leave people and places better than you found them," says Shirley Hopkinson, '81 BEd, '82 MEd, '86 PhD.

It's a philosophy she puts into practice every day as principal of Barnard Elementary School, in midtown Washington D.C. Hopkinson knows that many of her students don't come from the easiest environments.

Hopkinson's challenges often begin when a preschooler walks through her doors for the first time. "Some of these children, at three years old, aren't out of their baby-tongue speech yet. But they can tell you, 'Get out of my face' followed by a string of expletives."

During her eight years at Barnard, backed by a highly motivated staff, Hopkinson has built a program that not only improves the lives of her students, but their families and communities as well. And whenever anyone asks her for the source of her inspiration, she points to the U of A and the people who touched her life when she studied here.

In the early 1970s, Hopkinson was an early childhood education advisor in Guyana. "Early childhood education in our country was in an awful state," she recalls. "Anyone could have opened an early childhood centre in any place like under a mango tree. As long as they had children, and places for them to sit, and a teacher who spoke a reasonable level of English, that early childhood centre was a go."

When the People's National Congress took over the government, on a platform that leaned heavily on educational reform, Hopkinson was eager to hold them to their promises. She galvanized community support and brought the district's 18 early childhood centres up to international standards.

Before long, Hopkinson found herself hand-picked by the government for a scholarship to further her studies abroad. In 1976, she reluctantly left her three young children behind and boarded a plane for Edmonton.

From the start, Hopkinson felt she was being looked after by a higher power. "My mother was not very comfortable with me going to somewhere where she didn't know anyone,"



Meeting President Bill Clinton

she says. "But, somewhere along the way, a professor's name came up. And it was my third-grade teacher in Guyana – Dr. Kazim Bacchus."

The extraordinary coincidence proved to be Hopkinson's salvation. During the two years it had taken to process her documents, expenses had risen dramatically. "When I got to the U of A with my bundle of Guyanese money, I was almost one-third short," Hopkinson remembers. The Bacchuses welcomed Hopkinson into their home, and helped her find ways to earn extra cash to send home to her children.

"God is good," says Hopkinson, "and until this day Dr. Bacchus has been my biggest blessing in my journey. I am so proud to have been touched by him. He was really a wonderful person."

Hopkinson also happily rattles off the names of other professors who took her under their collective wing, including Myer Horowitz, Albert Nedd and Raj Pannu. "I used to earn some extra money by babysitting Dr. Raj's daughter," Hopkinson smiles. She also gratefully remembers the emotional support she got from department chair Pat McFetridge: "She helped me to maintain a daily balance in my emotional radar, especially when I was hurting for my children."

"The whole U of A experience – the people, the place, the challenges of the program – come together in one life-changing word: 'shoulder.' I'm short – four feet nine – and I will never forget those hands that lifted me up and placed me on their shoulders."

After completing her program, Hopkinson faced some serious soul-searching. "My parents had emigrated to the United States in '63," she says, "but I was never the type who wanted to leave Guyana." She turned to her parents for advice. "My father told me, 'When you just had your first degree, the politicians had trouble with you because you would not sell out the children. Now that you have a PhD, I'm begging you not to return to Guyana.'"

It was a crisis of conscience, because government monies had been involved in her education. Hopkinson also knew that the Guyanese government would exact a serious financial penalty if she failed to return. In the end, though, she decided to bring her children with her to the U.S.

"The final words of my father that made me decide to come to the United States were, 'Shirley, you can serve children anywhere in the world.'"

Hopkinson applied to be a teacher in D.C., where an old friend from Guyana was living with his family. When the district lost her paperwork, however, she instead wound up working for two years at the Easter Seals school. "I had not a single hour of training to work with children with disabilities," recalls Hopkinson, "but I really learned fast." In yet another portentous coincidence, the school's assistant principal came from Hopkinson's home village.

After finally landing a job with the D.C. public schools, Hopkinson quickly made a name for herself. In 1991 she won the D.C. Teacher of the Year Award and placed second in the national competition. As her reputation grew, Hopkinson faced pressure to move into a higher administrative role. "People would constantly say to me, 'Shirley, what are you doing sitting in a school?' But I just can't put 90 percent of my energy into working with adults. Rather, I made that conscious choice to touch the lives of children."

Hopkinson still finds herself drawing on knowledge she gained more than two decades ago in Edmonton. "Right now, D.C. educators are just starting to go through the process of using a standards curriculum and standards assessment, and benchmarks and so on. It's like *déjà vu* for me right now. I am so proud to have attended the U of A, because it

was way into the 21st century.”

At the same time, she continues to feed off of her emotional bond with the U of A. When she received last fall’s issue of the Orange, she burst into tears at the page of photos from the 2006 Reunion Weekend. “I was sitting at the conference table at my school. And my psychologist came running in. She said, ‘Doc, are you okay? Is somebody in here with you?’ I said, ‘No, I’m just reminiscing.’”

“Those are the emotions that my U of A experience still evokes in me. If I weren’t on people’s shoulders, I couldn’t have made it. I just try to take that support and pass it on to the people around me.”

Scott Rollans is an Edmonton-based freelance writer and editor with a special interest in education.

[Home](#) > Story