

A Q&A with San Francisco District Attorney Kamala D. Harris



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Influential African Americans.” During Charter Day 2006, Howard recognized her as a distinguished alumna for her contributions in law and public service. Last year, the *New York Times* also listed her as one of 17 women most likely to become the first female president of the U.S.

Harris recently spoke with Raven Padgett, editor of *Howard Magazine*, about her role as a leader in her profession, her work as district attorney, the upcoming election and the long lasting impact of her experience at “the Mecca.”

San Francisco District Attorney Kamala D. Harris (B.A. '86) ran a tough campaign during her freshman year at Howard. As a candidate for class representative for the Liberal Arts Student Council, the political science and economics major distributed flyers in Blackburn and on The Yard and spoke to students about why she was the best person for the job. Her commitment to being a student leader—she won the campaign—has evolved over the years into an even stronger commitment to being a formidable leader in her profession. Today, Harris is in the midst of a much bigger campaign, running for attorney general of California. If she wins the election in November 2010, it will be another notable distinction in an impressive career that took root in her years as an undergraduate at Howard.

Harris, 44, grew up in the Berkeley and Oakland areas of California and attended high school in Montreal, Canada. As a Howard student, she was chair of the Abraham Harris Economics Society and a member of the Frederick Douglass Debate Team. She also started on her long road of activism then, joining a group of her peers on the National Mall for weekly protests of the apartheid system in South Africa.

After graduating from Howard, she earned her law degree from the University of California Hastings College of Law.

When Harris was elected district attorney of San Francisco in 2003, she became the first woman to hold that office in the city and the first African-American woman to hold the office in California. She was re-elected in 2007 with 98 percent of the vote.

She has been featured in *Newsweek* as one of “America’s 20 Most Powerful Women,” and in *Ebony* as one of the nation’s “100 Most

Howard Magazine: What type of leader do you aspire to be?

Kamala D. Harris: I want to be a leader who makes a difference and, in the process, is a role model. It is really important to me to try to find ways to proactively mentor and, hopefully, inspire others. I want to let people know that they can do anything they want to do.

HM: Where do you get your inspiration?

Harris: First and foremost is my mother. She and my father met when they were active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. She was very strong, very principled and very committed to fighting for equality and justice. As a woman, she was committed to family; and as a professional, she was committed to excellence.

Early in my life, I knew I wanted to be a lawyer. I grew up in an environment where everyone was fighting and marching for civil rights. The architects of the movement were my heroes—Thurgood Marshall, Charles Hamilton Houston, Constance Baker Motley. They were using the skills of their profession to translate the passion and the strength into the courtrooms of our country.

HM: What do you consider important aspects of strong leadership and how did Howard prepare you to be a leader in your field?

Harris: First, you have to have a code and you need to stick to that code. For me, part of it is to be honest and to make decisions based on what I truly believe is the right thing to do. My prayer every night is that I will be judged based on a body of work and not on the popularity of any one decision. Another critical aspect is that you need to know what you are doing. You must be a student of your profession. The third aspect is to always encourage honest feedback before you make decisions. I am most comfortable with being surrounded by smart people who I can ask questions of and listen to before I make critical decisions. I always make the decisions, but a sign of strength is to acknowledge what you do not know and then learn it.

I would not be who I am today had it not been for my life experience and education at Howard. During the time you attend college, you become an adult. One of the challenges of becoming an adult is figuring out who you are and in what category you fit. Going to Howard teaches you at a very important stage in life that you can be anything you want to be and that you do not have to fit in some neat little box that is one-dimensional.

HM: As a woman of “firsts,” what advice would you give to young people new to their profession?

Harris: My mother taught me and my sister early on in life that, “You may be the first to do many things, but make sure you are not the last.” With being the first or excelling in your profession, there is a responsibility to make sure that you leave a path for others to

follow. That is not a purely benevolent exercise. I believe that we are only as strong as our legacy.

HM: How has your experience as a prosecutor and a district attorney shaped your view of the law?



Harris: We have said, and we believe in this country, that justice is one of the most important aspects of a civil society. And law has often been the way that justice is achieved, through the process of litigating everything from *Plessy v. Ferguson* to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Within the practice of law there are many areas, in criminal law in particular, that directly deal with the 4th, 5th and 6th Amendments. It relies on those fundamental principles to work. Justice is being done when the voiceless have a voice and the vulnerable receive protection and dignity in the process, and I wanted to be part of that work in my profession.

HM: What do you consider some of the greatest inequities in minority communities, where many of the voiceless and vulnerable live, and how can these inequities be eliminated?

Harris: I think the greatest inequities are the disparities in education. This is our most fundamental issue, not only for minorities but for our entire society. In California alone, of all the African American and Latino ninth-graders today, less than half will graduate from high school. If you walk into the county jail or the state prison, you see those numbers reflected. We all know that there is a connection. If we are going to deal in a smart way with this issue, it has to be through a collective approach and an agreement to prioritize it.

HM: An overwhelming number of Black males are in U.S. prisons, while college campuses continue to struggle to enroll and graduate young Black males. How can our country address this imbalance?

Harris: By addressing truancy in our schools. As the district attorney, I have not only focused on the conviction rate, which is the highest rate that it has been in

Harris is sworn in to her second term in office by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) on January 8, 2008, as her mother, the late Shyamala G. Harris, looks on.

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15 years, but I have also focused on children not going to school. We should focus on that sixth-grader who has missed 50 or 60 days during the school year rather than have to deal with that student when he or she turns 17 and is dealing drugs or doing something even more serious or violent.



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Harris spends time with members of the community as she makes a bid for attorney general of California.

HM: What programs/initiatives are you most proud of during your tenure as district attorney?

Harris: One is our truancy initiative. I looked at who our homicide victims under the age of 25 were and I found that 94 percent were high school dropouts. So I went to the school district and found that we had a very high number of children who were designated as habitually and chronically truant and that half of the total number were elementary school students. A child in elementary school who is missing 50 or 60 days out of a 180-day school year is never going to be completely functional or productive. I did something that was considered controversial, but it put an infrared light on the issue. I decided to prosecute parents for truancy. I believe strongly that a child going without an education is tantamount to a crime. I would not be here were it not for the education I received. The result is that we were able to put in place support systems for parents and in the process we have improved attendance rates by 23 percent. My goal was not to prosecute parents; I wanted the students to go to school.

I am also very proud of a reentry initiative that I started called Back on Track. In California, 70 percent of all people released from the state prison reoffend within three years of their release. I decided to focus on the 18 to 24-year-old, first time, nonviolent, low-level offender. When we are in college and within that age

range, we are called college kids. When you are in the system and you turn 18, you are considered an adult without any real regard to the fact that you are still in that stage of life. Most of these offenders did not have any employable skills so we got them enrolled in apprenticeship programs. Many of them had not completed their high school education, so we had them earn their GED and they enrolled at the city college. Many were parents, so we had community groups train them in parenting. Because of this focus, over the last four years, we have reduced the recidivism rate for that group from 54 percent to less than 10 percent. The National District Attorneys Association has chosen Back on Track as a model for district attorney offices around the country.

These programs get to the overall focus of my work. I have taken an oath; my responsibility and what society wants is that we have safe communities. If we are to truly maximize our ability to achieve public safety, it cannot be because we only react to crime. We also have to be invested in preventing a crime before it occurs. That is why I have taken on issues like truancy and reentry.

HM: Why did you decide to run for attorney general of California and what unique perspective do you feel you would bring to the position?

Harris: I believe that the criminal justice system in California needs improvement. I think that the work we have done so far—the reentry initiative, for example—can be effective in increasing public safety and can also save money. The California prison system occupies a \$10 billion line item in the state budget. We need to fix this in a way that is smarter in terms of public safety and is not such a drain on our public resources. I believe as a career prosecutor, I can do the work of providing some support to local law enforcement around our ability to be smart on crime. The initiatives that we have created can be and should be replicated on a statewide basis. I believe that we are ready and able to be a place of innovation, and that is the work that I want to do on a statewide level.

HM: Howard alumni continue to make remarkable strides in their fields, nationally and internationally, leaving a legacy for others to emulate. What do you hope your legacy will be?

Harris: Service to my profession; service to my state; service to my country.

HM: Anything else that you would like to add?

Harris: As Howardites, we come from such a proud tradition of excellence and service. It is a very special identity. In these times, we are seeing some of the best and some of the worst, and this is the time for the Bison to excel. We should take pride in that. We are indoctrinated to understand how special we are and how much we are expected to do. **F**