



Profiles
in Leadership

Kasim Reed

Working Harder Than His Dreams

By Raven Padgett



If you stand in just the right spot on the roof of the undergraduate library on the main campus, you can see the U.S. Capitol jutting out from the landscape. The Capitol, less than four miles away from the campus, symbolizes the cradle of American democracy but can seem a world away to a young college student. For Kasim Reed, the time he spent sitting on the roof while a Howard undergraduate student allowed him to dream, and is the place where many of his career aspirations began to take shape.

“I spent many hours there, thinking about my future,” says Reed (B.A. ’92; J.D. ’95). “There were benches on the roof when I attended, and I would sit there and think about what was possible, what I could accomplish.”

Reed recalls those inspired moments with a quiet reserve. Today, as mayor of Atlanta, he leads a vibrant metropolitan area that has deep roots in the

civil rights movement and is home to one of the nation’s largest Black professional classes. It’s also a city that has strong ties to Howard. Two of the previous mayors—Shirley Franklin (B.A. ’68) and Ambassador Andrew Young (B.A. ’51)—are both alumni. A few years ago, when they were being photographed during an event, Young pointed to the three of them, Reed recalls, and said: “The past, the present and the future.”

Young’s words struck a chord in Reed. After serving for 11 years in the Georgia General Assembly—two years as a state representative and nine years as a state senator—Reed threw his hat into the mayoral race. He had been Franklin’s campaign manager in 2001 (she served out a two-term limit) and worked as a partner with Holland & Knight LLP, an international law firm, but felt ready to take up the mantle of leadership as mayor. He won by 714 votes in a runoff election.

Since taking office in January 2010, Reed has implemented reforms that have greatly improved the city’s infrastructure. In just two years, he has balanced the city’s budget and increased the budget reserve from a dismal \$7.4 million to more than \$100 million, hired more than 600 additional police officers and improved services for sanitation and public works, all while tackling the city’s \$1.5 billion unfunded pension program. Yet, when he reflects on his accomplishments, one of the most significant to him is the reopening of all of the city’s recreation centers, including seven outdoor pools, many of which are located in disadvantaged neighborhoods and had been shuttered for years.

“It was important to reopen these centers because for the young people in these neighborhoods, this is a safe place for them,” he says. “We have to let them know that we care about them, because all too often they are forgotten.”

Reed’s unabashed vision for his hometown—he grew up in the Cascade neighborhood in southwest Atlanta—has garnered accolades from people inside and outside of the political realm, including *New York Times* reporter Thomas Friedman, who called Reed “inspiring” and “one of the best of this new breed of leaders,” referring to how the mayor balanced the budget by making tough decisions.

PHOTOS BY QUANTRELL D. COLBERT

He was recently named to The Griot's 100: History Makers in the Making list and received *Governing* magazine's 2011 Public Official of the Year award. Howard honored him during last year's Charter Day, and when the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies gave him the 2012 Louis E. Martin Great American Award, they said that he "heralds a new and creative approach to leadership."

Reed continues to impress people with his straightforward and visionary leadership in creating a better Atlanta.

"I want Atlanta to become the center of the South, a place where we embrace diversity and where all people feel welcome, a place where businesses thrive," he says. "And, after I leave office, I want to be remembered as a good steward who loved the city and left it a better place to live."

Path to Politics

"I love Howard," Reed states simply and often.

In many ways, he is the quintessential alumnus who carries with him a formidable Bison spirit and a strong desire to give back to a place that helped lay the foundation for his success. You may see him at a Charter Day dinner or during Opening Day Convocation or working with student volunteers in Atlanta during Howard's Alternative Spring Break. And, he currently serves on the Howard University Board of Trustees. (In 2002, he was appointed the youngest general trustee.)

When he was an undergraduate student interning for Congressman Joseph P. Kennedy, he discovered a federal matching grant program designed to assist historically Black colleges and universities. That program allowed him to establish a fund that, since its inception, has pumped \$11 million into the University's endowment.

"I wanted to help send an important message about alumni giving and also train young people to be philanthropists," he says. "I'm proud of this endowment particularly, because it will never stop contributing to the University, and it is one of the largest cumulative gifts in Howard's history."

Reed's appreciation for his *alma mater* began to develop even before he set foot on campus. Although his father encouraged him to attend another university, he



Reed follows in the footsteps of Young and Franklin, whose portraits hang near his office.

kept his sights on Howard.

"There is no other institution that has created a Black professional class like Howard has," he says. "If you look at any profession in this country, Howard has graduated a leader in that field. I knew that I wanted to be part of that history."

When he arrived on campus, he quickly immersed himself in the Howard experience. Even then, Alvin Thornton (Ph.D. '79), senior advisor to the president, saw glimpses of Reed's ambition. Thornton is the former chair of the Department of Political Science and was the director of the department's undergraduate studies program when Reed studied at Howard.

"It was evident that he had the attributes that would make him an effective political leader," says Thornton. "In his student advocacy, he reflected the lessons of sacrifice and community learned from his developing years in Atlanta. As an undergraduate, he was willing to assume demanding leadership roles at all levels of

student life. Our frequent conversations and debates focused on the obligations of political leaders to think outside themselves and be community-oriented. He represents Howard well as an articulate and clear-thinking person of integrity. He carries Howard with him."

Reed has fond memories of times spent in the Punchout and on the Yard, but the dreams he visualized on the undergraduate library roof are the ones that have stayed with him.

In recognition of those moments, he offers this advice to current students: "Dream and work hard, but work harder than your dreams."

He adds: "The young people who are here today are just as talented as the students were when I attended. Students should understand the legacy but not see the University as a museum, where accomplishments and strides were made in the past. It's important that they create a new legacy for themselves." ■HU