

Freeman A. Hrabowski, III

Born to Teach, Born to Lead

One day, at the age of twelve, Freeman Hrabowski sat in the back of his Birmingham church as he often did, following the proceedings while placating his active mind with math homework and peanut M&Ms. On that particular day, however, the visiting minister preaching before the congregation had something special about him. "It was the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and he said that if children became involved in peaceful protest, all of America would see that even children understand the difference between right and wrong," Freeman recounts today. "He said it would be the stepping stone to getting us black children into better schools."

The words resonated with Freeman, who had spent his young life studying from the hand-me-down textbooks of white students. He learned that the visiting minister was named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and he resolved to take action.

At first his parents resisted, fearing for their son's safety. But after a sleepless night of prayer, they knew they couldn't stand in the way of his will to be part of the solution. With that, Freeman joined a peaceful protest as part of the children's march—an effort that spurred the involvement of President Kennedy.

Bravely, Freeman led one of the groups of child protesters as the march proceeded from the church to the steps of City Hall. Together, the children sang spiritual songs to drown out the taunts of those law enforcement officers who sought to provoke them. When they arrived at their destination, Freeman came face to face with the police commissioner, who said menacingly, "What do you want, little negro?"

"We want to kneel and pray for our freedom to go to a better school," the boy responded, trying to keep the fear from his voice.

With that, Freeman was thrown into the police wagon and taken to jail along with several

other child protesters, where they remained for the next five days. "It was awful," he recalls. "They put us in with some seriously rough kids, and we were packed in like animals in cages. My kids were crying and saying they wanted their mothers, and I was just this geeky kid who loved math. But I taught my kids to repeat scripture over and over again whenever the others tried to beat us up. I figured out that the bad boys were somewhat afraid of the Bible, so they left us alone when we'd recite the Lord is my shepherd."

Dr. King visited the children in jail several days later, reminding them that their actions would have an impact on children who hadn't even been born yet. "I understood that we were changing the course of history," Freeman describes. "I understood the power and gravity of it, even at age twelve. And I felt a sense of responsibility toward those other kids. Looking back, that was thanks to my parents, who taught me to be free-thinking and independent, and to believe in

myself. I certainly was scared, but I knew that what we were doing was important. I knew it was the right thing to do."

It was not the first time Freeman had shepherded young people through challenges, and it wouldn't be the last. Now the President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), Freeman has dedicated his life to educating, mentoring, challenging, and nurturing young people and students of all ages, building a community and culture dedicated to helping each individual reach their intellectual potential. "I am inspired by the power of education to transform lives," he avows today. "When I talk to people, I often ask, where would you be today if not for the blessing of a good education? It's hard to even imagine where we'd be in life without it."

As UMBC prepares to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary this year, Freeman reflects back on its



beginnings in 1966 as a university to prepare students for the system's professional schools and graduate programs. Born as a liberal arts institution, the campus developed a heavy emphasis on both the sciences and the humanities, blossoming into a model of innovation.

Enrollment at UMBC now hovers around 14,000 students, comprised of 11,000 undergraduates and 3,000 graduate students. An additional 4,000 students participate in non-credit programs offered through the school's training company at locations around Baltimore County and elsewhere. Its student body is composed of individuals from over a hundred countries worldwide, and UMBC boasts the highest percentage of science and engineering graduates in the state of Maryland. "We send so many students to Harvard that the President of Harvard was our commencement speaker this year," Freeman says. "We produced one-third of the IT graduates in the state, and thanks to the ecosystem of national agencies in such close proximity, we have strong partnerships with entities like the National Institutes of Health and NASA. We also have over a hundred tech and innovation companies integrated into our campus."

The campus's mastery in science, technology, and engineering is enmeshed with excellence in the arts and humanities, particularly theater. Students can be found performing Beckett, playing chess, mastering piano concertos, and conversing in a myriad of foreign languages. "The life of the mind is very active here," Freeman says. "We encourage our students to get beyond their comfort zones, learning about people and ideas that are different from themselves. At UMBC, we learn to listen together."

Freeman started his journey with UMBC as Vice Provost in 1987, advancing to Executive Vice President in 1991 and President in 1992. He had a strong, close relationship with the previous president, who went on to serve as the president of the University of Massachusetts and then the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "He wanted me to come with him, but I believed in UMBC too much to leave," Freeman says. "I stayed at UMBC because of the chemistry I felt with the university, my colleagues, and the students." Now, a quarter century into his tenure at the helm of the school, UMBC has been recognized as a Top Ten School for its emphasis on undergraduate education, and in the top five schools in the

country when it comes to innovation. "Our message as a campus is that you don't have to be wealthy to be extraordinarily good," Freeman says.

For Freeman, enlightened leadership is never about one person. Rather, it's a collective—a group of people working toward a common goal, as happens at UMBC when teams of VPs, deans, and faculty and student leaders come together to accomplish great feats. Whether developing the school's research park or figuring out how to help minority students excel in STEM fields, these teams routinely demonstrate leadership that benefits the whole institution. "I have a fundamental belief that if you can figure out how to help one student, you can learn things that will help students of any background," Freeman says. "These efforts are united under the master plan of creating a caring environment, building community among students, setting high expectations, giving honest feedback, and providing the support students need to overcome problems, both academic and personal."

This structure supports UMBC's unflinchingly student-centric approach—a reflection of the Southern roots and personable approach that keep Freeman constantly connected to the students around him. Through texts, focus groups, individual meetings, and regular dinners with students, he remains plugged in to the pulse of the campus through the lived experiences of the students it serves. "I always emphasize that, as educators, we absolutely must know our students—their names, their dreams, their challenges," Freeman says. "Thanks in part to this philosophy, UMBC has been named one of the best colleges to work for five years in a row by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. We bring together people with similar values to create a wonderful, authentic culture that values transparency, integrity, and trust. At the end of the day, the buck stops with me if things don't go well. But if they do go well, that's something everyone has a hand in and everyone celebrates."

Thanks to the caliber of UMBC's faculty and students, there is much to celebrate. One graduate developed a pacemaker-like device for the brains of bipolar patients, and is now an associate professor at Duke University. Another graduate is an MD/PhD working in radiation oncology. Undergrads studying in other countries routinely write to tell Freeman about their exciting

experiences. The head of the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab earned his PhD in computer science from UMBC. And one of Freeman's closest mentees, a man who got three degrees from UMBC, is now the President of Clemson University. "We have amazing graduates who are out doing incredible things in the world," Freeman says. "We see them out there thriving and helping others. What could be better than that?"

Freeman's leadership style has always been consultative, defined by an enduring interest in building consensus from different points of view. "It's crucial that people believe—not only in the vision, but also in the approach we're taking," Freeman says. "That way, when we have success, it's owned by everyone. Success is never about one person; it's about a group of people and the ideas they believe in." Freeman credits his team for his having won the Carnegie Corporation of New York's Academic Leadership Award, the Heinz Award for Improving the Human Condition, the TIAA-CREF Theodore M. Hesburgh Award for Leadership Excellence, and the McGraw Prize in Education, among numerous others.

In many ways, Freeman was born to teach and born to lead. When his mother, a school teacher, became pregnant, female teachers in the South were required to give up their professions immediately. Demonstrating a rebellious streak that would continue on strong in her son, she kept her pregnancy a secret, and the other women teachers at the school took to wearing loose frocks so she could hide the signs as long as possible. She continued teaching through June, and Freeman was born in August.

Growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, he was the only child of older parents who treated him with an air of maturity even when he was a baby—a parenting style that cultivated swift development of his capacity for advanced thought and articulation. Firmly rooted in the Christian faith, his parents were both educators and believed deeply that there was no greater honor in life than being a teacher. His mother, in particular, was an English teacher who returned to school in the 1960s to learn "the new math"—a way of teaching STEM that arose from the race to the moon. "The idea was that strong language skills were directly linked to mathematical proficiency because they equipped you to solve math word problems," Freeman recalls. "Many teachers at the time were wary of this approach, but my mother embraced it,

and she used me as her guinea pig."

As a result, Freeman outpaced his peers at breakneck speeds. By age six, he was so bored at school that his teachers kept him busy by assigning him several students to mentor in reading and math. "What I loved most to do at that age was help other kids," he recalls. "I knew children had problems in school because they didn't have the advantage of educated parents and hadn't been taught to read at home, so I taught them. It taught me so much about compassion and the possibilities for every child. It taught me the power of slowing down and looking at a child with hope, and how to explain concepts with clarity. This was happening both at school and at home, because students would routinely come over for tutoring lessons. My family was like an education epicenter in our community, which was a very rich experience for me."

It was an experience made all the richer through his mother's use of classic novels to impart life wisdom and lessons in morality. Church was an equally constant presence in Freeman's upbringing, and his weeks were populated by Baptist Training Union meetings, Youth Fellowship, choir practice, and Sunday services. Inquisitive to the point of great frustration on behalf of his elders, Freeman questioned everything—a novel character trait in Southern society where children were often taught to be seen and not heard. "My parents always taught me to think and gave me the latitude to ask why," he recalls. "In church and in Youth Fellowship, I questioned the minister and got on his last nerve because I'd pose questions he couldn't answer."

But through his frustration with the young boy, Reverend John Porter reflected on the importance of leading an examined life as he developed a deep affinity for Freeman. The pastor, who had been an assistant to Dr. King's father in Atlanta, modeled unconditional love as he showed Freeman that one can have confidence in ideas while still maintaining humility. "He taught me to speak and interpret scripture and to live my faith, conveying it through actions rather than words," Freeman says. "Later, when I entered college, he gave me his Bible, complete with all his notes. It's still my most treasured possession. He always made me laugh, and he had this deep and abiding faith that he spoke about with such authenticity. He's very much still a part of me today."

Other teachers weren't as accepting of a child's ability to point out where they were wrong—particularly the math teachers that Freeman would challenge. "I was taught to tell the truth, and I thought that meant telling teachers when I knew they were wrong," he recalls with a laugh. "My mother had been teaching me eighth grade math years in advance, and when I saw a teacher conveying the wrong logic, I said so. With time, I learned the art of subtlety."

Freeman grew up in an educated neighborhood, where a relative of General Powell served as the high school principal and Condoleezza Rice's father worked as the high school counselor. "Reverend Rice would come to the Baptist Church to work with the Youth Fellowship, and he also worked with the Honors Society," Freeman says. "He would allow me to really be rebellious intellectually, which was great. He was an amazing man who loved that I would read anything, and challenged other kids to read too. As long as we had read widely and had some basis for our disagreement, we were allowed to say whatever we wanted to say, provided we said it respectfully."

In a sense, Freeman's childhood was as charmed as a child of color growing up in the Deep South in the 1950s could hope for. His parents worked five jobs between them, but they were able to afford piano lessons and books to satiate their son's endless interest in the world and the many ideas that populate it. "I was so blessed to have such hardworking parents who showed me the value of faith, commitment, the arts, and a loving and respectful marriage," he reflects. "My mother and father both gave unconditional love, and I think that made all the difference. I knew they cared so deeply. Each was a good thinker and enjoyed talking about ideas, both with each other and with me."

Still, he was aware of the Civil Rights Movement and the challenges in nearby Montgomery, Alabama—topics that frequently dominated the family's dinner conversation. He recalls boycotts of restaurants that didn't allow blacks to dine in, and of clothing stores that refused to employ blacks. "The kids were upset because they didn't get their new Easter clothes one year, but those efforts did have a marked economic impact," Freeman says. "I also remember the year my parents sent me to a summer school program in Massachusetts. I could

see what it was like to go to school with white kids. I loved the rigorous coursework and high standards, but I was the only black kid in the class, and nobody would speak to me. I'd raise my hand, and the teachers would look right through me. I took what I could from that experience and kept moving."

Around that time, Freeman's father left his job as a teacher to work at the steel mill in town, where he encountered many workers who had never finished high school. He sent them to Freeman's mother, who taught GED math and reading and helped them earn their high school diploma. Freeman, himself, knew he was destined for college, and much more. "I had always had the goal of becoming the dean of a college and teaching math because I had been inspired by a certain teacher when I was going into eleventh grade at the age of thirteen," he says. "He put a math problem on a board and said we could come see him when we'd figured it out. To me, that was the height of intellectual activity, and I wanted to be like him. I heard he had a PhD—something I had never heard of before. I decided I was going to get one too."

From that day on, Freeman would wake up, look at himself in the mirror, and say, "Good morning, Dr. Hrabowski." When a teacher gave the class ten problems to complete, he would demand ten more. A natural leader who wasn't afraid to speak his mind, he was elected president of the Youth Fellowship, the choir, the honor society, and his senior class. The pattern continued in college when he enrolled at Hampton College, the alma mater of his hero, Booker T. Washington. "I was supposed to go to Morehouse, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had done," he says. "They invited me to come when I was fourteen, but my mother held me back at the last minute because she didn't think I was emotionally ready. I was angry about that, so the next year, I rebelled and applied on my own to Hampton. My mother was devastated because she thought Virginia counted as the North, and she was sure they had no manners up there. But it was a great experience. She had wanted me to go somewhere where people would keep building my sense of self, and Hampton definitely did that."

At Hampton, Freeman met Jackie, a vibrant young woman who stole his heart immediately. They spent half a year in Egypt as exchange students together, and when they

returned for their senior year, Freeman found that he had been elected president of his class yet again. "I had developed a reputation for honesty, integrity, and follow-through," he says. He also became close with the President of Hampton, an amazing leader who sent Freeman to New York and Atlanta to speak on his behalf. Freeman and Jackie married when he was nineteen, and he enrolled in graduate school at the University of Illinois.

Then, at age twenty, the tone of Freeman's life changed decidedly when his father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. "I was newly married, and I rushed home from graduate school to be there with him the night they told him he probably wouldn't live," Freeman recalls. "That was the night I decided that it was time to truly grow up and be a man." His mother managed to keep his father alive for the next eight years, but the strongest man Freeman had ever known dwindled away to a completely paralyzed state, unable to even speak. "It was a defining moment in my life when I had to answer the question, who was I and who did I want to be?" he says.

In answering that question, Freeman decided to get a combined degree in higher education administration and statistics, becoming the stats guru of the university. He became an assistant dean for a year, and when he finished his PhD program in 1975, they asked him to stay. But Freeman was called back to his roots to serve as an associate dean teaching statistics at Alabama University. He then became dean at Coppin State University, a historically black college serving the inner city of Baltimore. "I wanted to understand the impact of poverty on children and young people," he says. He was well-respected, promoted to VP in 1981 at the age of 31. Then the UMBC president invited him to join their campus in 1986, spurring the impassioned dedication to the school's campus and students which would become the focus of his life's work.

Through it all, Freeman's wife, Jackie, has remained his best friend and closest confidant. A leader in her own right, she served as VP at T. Rowe Price for many years, and now serves as the National Director of Philanthropy for the premier black women's group in the country, Links Incorporated. In that capacity she has excelled at raising funds that allow students to pursue their educational goals, echoing a time several years ago when she and Freeman served as the first African

American Chairs of the United Way of Central Maryland and raised over \$40 million for that effort. "She's always believed in me and been willing to give me honest feedback, which is incredibly important," he says. "She is a committed mentor to countless young people, and I'm so inspired and nurtured by the unconditional love we share. Our theme has always been, "If not us, then who? If not now, then when?" That's how we've lived our lives." Freeman and Jackie have a son, Eric, and a grandson.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Freeman encourages his students to talk with as many people as possible about their stories and journeys. "Understanding the challenges of others, and how they overcame those challenges in reaching their goals, is key to understanding life and one's own self," he says. "Beyond that, I would encourage anyone to embrace the community around them with as much positivity as possible. There's something about building community that grabs the heart and builds loyalty. I decided that giving my career—my life's work—to UMBC was as important an achievement as I could possibly have. It's about the power of education to transform lives. UMBC is a wonderful success story in how people from more than a hundred countries around the world can come together and focus on the life of the mind and the life of the heart. It's the kind of place that's truly needed in today's world."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

