

ON GUARD FOR 177 YEARS

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From average to impressive

Howard University president and native Detroiters Sidney Ribeau recalls how the right kind of education made all the difference



Kerry-Ann Hamilton/Howard University

Sidney A. Ribeau: "Students here have a mission to use what they learn to make the world a better place."

By **CASSANDRA SPRATLING**
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Growing up on Detroit's west side, Sidney Ribeau wasn't the kind of kid people would point to and say, "He's going to be somebody some day."

He was an average youngster, going to school because he had to, not because of a burning fire to succeed.

His parents were not college-educated, but they made it clear that he would go to college. So he went to Wayne State University because his best buddy's dad connected him with the basketball coach. And though he eventually chose not to play ball there, something more important happened.

The fire for learning was lit.

And that fire propelled him from teaching adults to read to the presidency of Howard University in Washington, D.C., one of the nation's premiere historically black colleges.

Ribeau, 61, took the helm at Howard in August after serving as president of Bowling Green University in Ohio for 13 years. He returns home today as the keynote speaker for the Southern Oakland County NAACP dinner.

Looking back, Ribeau believes that fire for learning was always there, stoked by the home environment established by his late father, Bernard, a postal worker, and his mother, Catherine, a stay-at-home mom who now lives in suburban Detroit. As a kid, he also admired an uncle -- Wayne Edmonds -- who was a football star and graduate of the University of Notre Dame. Just the fact that his uncle had attended college made him a bit of a hero among the family.

"Neither of my parents had a college education, but they were always reading and there were always books around," Ribeau says. "My dad was always saying, 'You can be anything you want to be.' Remember those big sets of encyclopedias? My parents would buy those. And sometimes, I'd just decide to read all the Q's or all the O's, just out of curiosity."

But as a child, Ribeau never connected his fondness for reading to what he was doing in school. He sees that as a problem with school systems today -- too focused on passing exams and less focused on

RIBEAU | Howard University chief draws on Detroit roots



finding ways to help children enjoy and explore learning.

Teachers at Wayne, including Geneva Smitherman and Ed Pappas, got him excited about learning. He caught their contagious enthusiasm. "I discovered I really enjoyed reading and thinking and discussing ideas," he says.

While there, he was among several students recommended to a special program to help teach poor, uneducated adults to read.

"It was life-changing for me," Ribeau says. "I had the opportunity to see how education can really open doors, not only to employment, but to self-confidence. Being able to read gave them a sense of pride, a sense of self-worth. That was power! That sense of empowerment made me think -- teaching, that's one of the most meaningful things anyone can share."

Deputy Detroit Mayor Saul Green has been close friends with Ribeau since they were classmates at Mackenzie High School.

"Sid is a wonderful example that you don't always know where the stars are going to come from," says Green, a former U.S. attorney. "Sid has always been an extremely thoughtful person; he really cares about people. A significant part of our relationship involves long conversations on the phone as we talk and reflect and try to figure out what's going on in the world around us."

Ribeau's success doesn't surprise Pappas, who was also his academic adviser at Wayne.

"He stood out as an inquisitive, highly curious student who always followed up a question with another question," recalls Pappas, who recommended that Ribeau also earn a master's degree, which led to a PhD at the University of Illinois and then a teaching position at California State University.

Ribeau taught for almost 12 years. Teaching led to administrative appointments, which led to higher positions and eventually presidency of Bowling Green University in 1995.

Then Howard came calling.

He had never attended or taught at any of the nation's 105 historically black universities, institutions begun when segregation forbade whites and blacks from going to the same school. But friends and colleagues were graduates, and he knew of its respected record for producing doctors, dentists, teachers and lawyers.

Still, he rejected their overtures until a persuasive search team convinced him to visit and hear them out. People on that team were individuals he'd long admired, including former Time Warner chief Richard Parsons and Gen. Colin Powell.

"Although they were not graduates of Howard, they believed so passionately in the mission of Howard and its legacy ... they were so compelling in their expressions of the significance of the institution that I wanted to be part of that," he says.

Ribeau's goals at Howard include increasing funding for the university, expanding its international and study abroad opportunities for both

students and faculty, enhancing its research programs, especially in the area of reducing health care disparities and developing strong leaders in business, politics and other professions.

Howard also has a special role to play in training teachers who can excite students to learn, the way he became excited during his college years, he says.

"A great teacher releases the intellectual potential that every student has, no matter where he or she is," he says.

He says one of the things he most enjoys is simply walking casually around the campus, meeting and talking with students.

"Every college I've worked at, students have been bright, confident and intelligent," he says. "My wife and I have noticed that here, too. But we've also noticed that the students here also have a belief that they have a mission and a purpose to use what they learn to make the world a better place. I've enjoyed the enthusiasm and the energy of the students."

And they seem to like him as well.

"I've seen him at a lot of events around campus and he takes a genuine interest in the students," says Brittney Thomas, 20, a junior studying nutritional health, and president of the student Michigan Club. "He's already having a positive impact, just by being so visible and personable."

Contact CASSANDRA SPRATLING at 313-223-4580 or cspratling@freepress.com.

