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Nina Harris has been president and CEO of the Springfield Urban League since 2004.
By John Moody | STAFF

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Rising to the challenge

Springfield Urban League leader remembers 'forgotten segments'

By John Moody

Nina Harris had it all planned out, just like most young people do. She was going to have a career in money - accounting, banking or finance, that sort of thing. And, for sure, she was going to catch a look at her hometown, Springfield, in her rearview mirror.

"I was headed to a major metropolitan city," she says.

Nina M. Harris, the 'M' is for Maria, is president and CEO of the Springfield Urban League. The league is

the sixth largest urban league in the country and the largest in the state: "Even bigger than Chicago," Harris says.

She was good in mathematics. She spent a few years working for the state before coming to the Springfield Urban League full-time in 1992. She had been a member of the board of directors for two years prior to that. She has been executive assistant to the president, vice president of personnel and administration, then second in command as executive vice president. She's been the boss since 2004.

Turned out to be a good thing that she was so good at math given that she runs an organization that staffs 225 people and has an annual budget of \$10.4 million.

The Springfield Urban League was established in 1926. It's a civil rights, non-profit organization that serves the needs of some 6,000 people every year. The group's initiatives include job training, economic development, home ownership, educational and after-school programs, to name just a few.

Its official mission is to: "empower African Americans, other emerging ethnic groups and those who struggle to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and civil rights."

Harris sees it as something of a calling.

"This is important work because this type of work is the ultimate expression of servitude," she says. "You encounter many people struggling; they are forgotten segments.

"It's helping to change their mindsets. They have potential. They themselves, their families and the community will fare better if they tap into their potential. And, that is very gratifying to see."

The key for bettering a life is, according to Harris, "absolutely education."

"Poverty is a very real-life experience, but it's also a state of mind," she says. "It's easy to just exist for whatever reason it's easy to just plod along until someone else can tell you about something different, something better."

Harris thinks success can be boiled down to a pretty basic first step, one that just takes a tiny bit of gumption: "As long as you have the courage ... if you can muster the courage to raise your hand, you can do it."

That is, to literally raise your hand up high in a classroom, then you're on your way. That's how Harris sees it, and she has a point. Not to mention the fact that she's been there.

She worked her way through junior college and UIS for bachelor's and master's degrees. She made the dean's list and the National Dean's List of America.

Not that she was poor, she had a middle-class upbringing, but there wasn't a lot of money in a house with six kids, three boys and three girls. Her father, Clarence Bailey, was a Springfield firefighter, and her mother, Lula, was a homemaker.

"We lived on the east side; we weren't rich," she recalls. "I was the second of six kids, and our parents told us that we would go to college. They weren't specific about what we had to study, but we were going."

Harris has carried on that tradition in her own family. She and husband, Jesse, have a little guy, Jesse IV, who is 7 1/2. Harris tells him he will go to college, too, and then she adds on a little.

"I tell my son he's going to be a pediatric neurosurgeon, but he's at an age now where he's negotiating," she says smiling. "He wants to be a robotic engineer, which he got from a Star Wars exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry."

The Harrises both grew up in Springfield. She graduated from Springfield High in 1985, and her husband is a Southeast alum, class of 1980. They like taking their son to Chicago, to expose him to a whole other world, she says. That means a lot of things. It means riding the train. It means world-class architecture and restaurants. And, most importantly, it means people. All kinds of people, people of different colors and different socio-economic backgrounds. All good for a young person's development, Harris thinks.

And, what about the election of our nation's first African-American president? Does Harris expect ripple effects from such an historic sea change?

Consider first that Harris has been delivering her positive message of empowerment to young people for years and years. Barack Obama, she says, will help her get that message through.

"We are non-partisan and enjoy many non-partisan relationships," she says, choosing her words carefully on the topic of politics. "But President-elect Obama is phenomenal, tremendous.

"In my opinion, (his election) is an inspiring feat that represents proof positive that, in our country, you can do anything if you apply yourself ... It's electric. I feel part of it."

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