

Keith Parent  
Independent Study  
African Americans at Hopkins Project  
Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis

Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis is a woman who understands what it means to break barriers and defy the odds. She embodies much of what the Women's and Civil Rights Movements hoped to accomplish in the last half of the twentieth century. As the first African-American to graduate with a Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University. Dr. DeCosta-Willis experienced the hardships of "being a black woman in a white man's world." Equally important, she remains an outspoken leader for civil rights, a strong voice for change within the academy, and a model mentor for young African-Americans and women who wish to follow in her footsteps.

### **Early Years**

Miriam DeCosta was born in Florence, Alabama on November 1, 1934 into a well-educated, middle-class family in the Southern United States. Her family has roots that branch out all across the South, including places like Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina. Still, much of who she is today comes from the experience of schooling in the North, and the teachings of her highly educated parents. Her father, Dr. Frank A. DeCosta, was a college professor and administrator who served as Dean of the Graduate School at Morgan State University, and her mother was a social worker, college professor, and, later, a counselor with the Baltimore Public Schools Miriam is the older of their two children.

Like many academic families they moved around a lot; her parents taught at Alabama State Teachers College and South Carolina State College before moving to Baltimore. The

experience of living in different places helped her to develop a keen sense of cultural understanding and worldly intelligence that most black women of her generation could only dream about, as she recalled. Yet, the teachings of her father who emphasized, "education, achievement, accomplishment, entering the professions, having a good life, and not rocking the boat," gave her the strength and stability that made her the powerful and successful black woman she is today.

These guidelines set forth by her father helped to shape DeCosta-Willis, giving her a militant yet passionate persona that is still apparent today. At the same time, her mother played an important role in giving her these characteristics as well. DeCosta-Willis explains one of her most memorable childhood experiences was that of seeing her mother refuse to give up:

I remember one incident very strongly; my parents were working at Alabama State Teachers College at the time that the Montgomery bus boycott began and I happened to be visiting there because I was a senior at Wellesley at the time... while I was there I observed my mother getting up early in the morning, getting in her car, picking up people who were standing at the bus stop and taking them to their jobs because blacks were not taking the bus. They were boycotting the buses. We got a call early in January of 1956 during the mid-semester break. We got a call that Martin Luther King's home had been bombed, and he lived on the street, Jackson Street, where my parents used to live. My mother and I got into the car and raced down to the house and we stood in the front yard. I can remember these very tall policemen standing in front of the house and telling people, "Get back, get back," and everybody slowly moved back. But my mother stood there with her little short self, and she refused to move. I think that one incident really kindled my own courage and determination not to move back in the face of oppression.

Experiences like this, as well as others that include being in Memphis in 1967, when Dr. King was assassinated, give DeCosta-Willis edginess, charisma, and power that very few individuals attain in their lifetime. DeCosta-Willis chose to fulfill her dreams as a scholar, yet she showed very early on that black women, and in her case girls, have just as much political influence as their male counterparts.

It was equally important to Dr. DeCosta-Willis that she not waste the gifts and opportunities made available to her at home and at school. She developed a determination for success and a drive to make some kind of difference in a world that was in dire need of change. When she was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at Wilkinson High School in Orangeburg, South Carolina, Miriam DeCosta was elected student council president for the following year, her senior year. This may have been her first breakthrough, because she was one of the first girls to be elected to this position. As one of her first initiatives, she planned to take on one of the most controversial topics of her time – accommodationism in race relations. At that time her principal took a very Booker T. Washington-like stance on the topic of improving the economic and social standings of black Americans, as she recalled. This was the exact opposite of what Miriam felt should be done, however. Her own personal beliefs were more in line with those of W.E.B. Du Bois; she felt that integration and the development of scholarship within the African-American community was crucial to improving the social position of Black Americans. Her political stance as a teenager was a foreshadowing of the scholarly achievements Dr. DeCosta-Willis would make in the future. Soon after her election as president, Miriam organized a protest of the principal's "Uncle Tom leadership," by having her fellow classmates meet to unify and peacefully object to this way of thinking. Her small movement through collective action was successful, and she began her life long journey in protest through scholarly activism. Activism and politics were indeed important to her, but scholarship and academics were of the up-most importance to both Miriam and her parents.

After moving from Alabama to South Carolina, Georgia, and Pennsylvania with her parents, DeCosta attended excellent schools, including private and public schools in the South and Westover School in Middlebury, Connecticut. Initially, she experienced some academic

problems at the preparatory school, where she had to compete with wealthy students who had attended expensive private schools, but with from her mathematician father, she found herself at the top of her class, graduating with five out of ten awards—the most that had ever been earned by a single student.

During her years at Wellesley, DeCosta developed an interest in languages. She entered Wellesley in 1952, intending to major in French, but after meeting some of the Spanish professors she fell in love with that language. Scholars like Jorge Guillén, a well-known Spanish poet, and Justina Ruiz de Conde, became close friends and were major influences over DeCosta's career path. Socially, however, she encountered a number of challenges. Although she was popular and well liked, she found herself in situations that were very different from those of her white friends.

There were several occasions when the prospect of a white roommate came up. DeCosta-Willis explains how these incidents affected her while in college as well as in her life later on. “An Austrian girl named Hildegard Pokorny, with whom I was very friendly, went to the dorm matron and told her that she would like to room with me and the matron told her, “Well if you room with Laurie DeCosta (which was my nickname), then the other students will ostracize you, so I would advise you not to room with her.” DeCosta-Willis then goes on to explain that experiences like this prepared her intellectually and socially, in that they helped her to see that racism was not just a “southern problem.” She realized that it was endemic to the North, yet much more subtle, much more covert.” This realization prepared her to enter “full steam” into the Civil Rights Movement.” Overall, she enjoyed and embraced her time at Wellesley. Still, her drive for scholarly enlightenment was fueled by the feeling that, as a black woman, she would have to go above and beyond her peers in order to be noticed and respected.

## **The Johns Hopkins University**

After graduating from Wellesley, Dr. DeCosta-Willis was determined to go on to graduate school. But the shift from her undergraduate education at Wellesley to graduate work at The Johns Hopkins University (JHU) was underscored by two major changes. The first was her age. When she first decided to attend Wellesley, she was a young, curious, and wide-eyed seventeen-year-old adolescent. When she decided to attend JHU for her Master's Degree in 1959, she was an adult with adult responsibilities on her shoulders. After her junior year in college, she had married Russell B. Sugarmon, an attorney, who had graduated from Rutgers and received a law degree from Harvard and she had given birth to two children. At age twenty-five, Miriam D. Sugarmon made the brave decision to begin a Master's Degree.

Dr. DeCosta-Willis describes the change from Wellesley to Hopkins as one that consisted of three components: race, gender, and age. When talking about the demographics at JHU she said, "I would say it was 99% white male. So I went from a white female situation to a white male situation." At Hopkins, then, she was not only one of the only black students on campus, she was also one of very few women. This meant that she was forced to battle both race and gender bias from faculty and students alike. An ironic example of Johns Hopkins University's race and gender politics is seen in the decision to admit Miriam Sugarmon to the Romance Languages Department. It was only through a fluke of mistaken identity, and a "good Jewish surname--Sugarmon--that she had the opportunity to attend JHU at all. As she recalls, Dr.

Nathan Edelman, who was then Chair of the Romance Languages Department and one of JHU's few Jewish faculty members, evaluated her application. At the time, applications were accompanied by photographs. With her light skin and long black hair, Miriam Sugarmon had a sort of Mediterranean look. And with a name like Sugarmon, Edelman believed that she was Jewish and perhaps wanted to encourage more Jews to apply to Hopkins. Yet, Dr. Edelman was reluctant to admit her because he wondered what a "good Jewish wife and mother of two" was doing leaving her husband in order to pursue a doctorate. In the end, Mrs. Sugarmon was accepted. But this confusion of ethnic identity and gender roles highlights the current gender politics and feminist influences that streamlined both the civil rights and feminist movements, as well as the many patterns of discrimination for Jews and African-Americans that were very much a part of the university's history.

The move to JHU in 1959 was, for Miriam Sugarmon, enjoyable and enlightening. Graduate study not only broadened her understanding of languages, but it also took her to new levels in understanding languages and their origin. This educational experience brought her academic interests and her political activism to the international arena as well. She explained that, as an undergraduate, she studied literature and culture, concentrating more on the social and cultural backgrounds of Spanish writers. At Hopkins, however, her studies were more abstract and more centered on literary theory. She notes that leading scholars such as Professors Bruce Wardropper, Elias Rivers, and René Girard inspired her later transnational and international work. She explained that getting a handle on literary criticism was difficult at first, but after hours and hours spent buried in the library, she mastered literary theories and was able to apply these concepts to her own scholarly work.

In 1960, Sugarmon completed her M.A. in Romance languages and left her graduate studies for a while to return to Memphis and resume her activities in the Civil Rights Movement. She also had two more children, but she did not give up the idea of continuing on for a Ph.D., so she returned to Hopkins in 1965, and was accepted in the doctoral program of the Romance Languages Department. One of her main goals was to complete the course work for the doctorate in a single year, an accomplishment that was unheard of at Hopkins, especially by a thirty-year-old, African-American wife and mother. After months of hard work, study, and sacrifice, Miriam Sugarmon attained her objective, winning the respect and admiration of many of her peers and professors. Dr. Thomas Hart, a leading scholar of Spanish literature and a personal mentor to Sugarmon, told her that she had “redeemed his faith in teaching.” Yet, it was not the attainment of M.A. and Ph.D. degrees that Sugarmon valued most; it was that she was able to do so while successfully raising and supporting her children. This period of her development as a mother and female scholar highlights a major conflict in the Women’s Movement during the 1960s and today: the struggle between motherhood and a career. Yet, this African-American graduate of Hopkins managed to make it work, and she is a living example of what is possible. She has also made it her life’s work to support younger scholars who wish to follow in her footsteps.

When reflecting on her years at Hopkins, Dr. DeCosta-Willis made it clear that she was very much involved in her education and caring for her family; therefore her time at Hopkins--unlike her Wellesley experience--was not about socializing. Still, while in graduate school, she used her motherly touch and understanding to connect with the mostly white male student population. What some would have seen as a drawback – being a mother and a scholar –she turned into a strength.

Dr. DeCosta-Willis described JHU in the 1960s as “dark, dismal and full of both academic and financial pressures.” She recalls Hopkins as an institution that promoted a high-stress atmosphere because the faculty and administration believed that this would foster a competitive and more effective institution of higher learning. She recalls that many of the students became depressed and, in some cases, suicidal. In that setting she became “a kind of mother confessor for a lot of the students.” She explained how other graduate students “would come and talk to me about, you know, a lot of the problems they were going through, so we were really a very close-knit bunch.” Given the fact that the city of Baltimore remained racially segregated at the time, and that gender and race relations on campus were tenuous, her ability to engage her fellow students this way was all the more remarkable.

Yet, campus life was not always pleasant for this mother of four and young scholar. She dealt with traumatic events that would have frightened most women, especially a black woman who was a rarity on the Homewood campus. Late one night, Miriam Sugarmon was working late at the Eisenhower Library, a building in which most floors were below ground level. It was spring vacation and so she was alone on the library’s bottom floor, where the language books and periodicals were located. With her nose buried deep in Spanish literature books and her eyes racing from line to line, she suddenly noticed a dark figure out of the corner of her eye. She looked up quickly and saw a man. She continued reading, but she kept her eyes on the chilling silhouette of the unknown man. He began circling her, and she knew that she was in danger because the only way out of the library was up the elevator. With a terrifying dash, she ran to the elevator and avoided what she believes could have been a sexual assault. This incident suggests how intimidating the campus might have been for a young black woman intent on reaching her scholastic goals.

Although the Hopkins atmosphere was not always relaxed and inviting, it did offer Miriam Sugarmon a place where she could be completely involved with her academic studies, and she welcomed the immersion for a time. She felt burned out by the constant struggles of the Civil Rights Movement in which she had devoted so many years. And the time at Hopkins, allotted to academic and scholarly enrichment, was “the serenity, peace and calm,” that she needed to figure out where she wanted to head next.

### **Life after Hopkins**

In 1966, Miriam Sugarmon became the first black faculty member at Memphis State University where, ironically, she had been denied admission years before. A year later, she became the first African-American woman to obtain her Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University. What is even more astonishing is that she managed to complete her course work in a single year – a feat which was impossible according to many at the University at the time. After graduating from JHU with her doctorate, she remained active in the Civil Rights movement for as long as she could. As the chair of the NAACP’s Education Committee, she led a movement to boycott the Memphis City Schools to obtain equality and representation on the School Board. As advisor to the Black Students Association at Memphis State, she orchestrated a sit-in of the president’s office and organized the Faculty Forum to support efforts at the university and in the city schools. Her work played a central part in ending legalized segregation in a range of settings, both through her own example and her activism. During the 1960s, she was arrested and she and her children were maced; and in 1968, she participated in the march and demonstrations that led to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis.

After years of activism, however, Dr. Sugarmon needed a change for herself and for her children. She divorced her husband, who was still very much involved in the political and civil rights struggle. In 1970, she accepted a position at Howard University in the Foreign Languages Department and moved from Memphis to Washington, D.C.

Dr. DeCosta-Willis explains that after moving away from political activism and toward a more academically oriented life, she found she could combine her interest in equal rights for black people and women with her academic interests. At Howard she met early pioneers in the field of Afro-Hispanic literature and history like Martha Cobb and Richard Jackson, who “threw her into a whole different arena of scholars from the Caribbean and Africa.” She went on to describe her experience at Howard as “so exciting at that time...where I did a lot of reading of African writers, Cuban writers, Dominican writers, Venezuelan writers -- all black writers across the world.” DeCosta-Willis went on to explain the irony of how ignorant she was to this entirely different world of academia while studying at JHU and what an eye-opening experience it was for her to teach at Howard. In 1974, she became Professor of Spanish and Chair of the Department of Romance Languages.

In 1972, she married Attorney A. W. Willis and four years later she returned to Memphis, where she taught at LeMoyne-Owen College, a historically black college, It was here that she became very interested in African-American women’s literature. She fused all of these areas of interest, as well as her history and experiences in the Civil Rights Movement to mold her area of expertise. She later wrote several successful books that directly examined this complex field of study, including *Erotique Noire / Black Erotica* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1992) and *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), and a host of path-breaking articles. She also served as associate editor of *SAGE: A*

*Scholarly Journal on Black Women* for more than ten years. In 1989, Dr. DeCosta-Willis returned to the Mid-Atlantic Area as Commonwealth Professor of Spanish at George Mason University. In 1991, she took a position at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where she taught until her retirement from teaching in 1999 to become a full-time author. Today she continues to divide her time between Washington, D.C. and Memphis. She is currently working on a biography of her father, as well as her own memoirs. She is also working on a book entitled, *Notable Black Memphians*, which is a collection of over 500 biographies of members of the black community in Memphis, Tennessee.

### **Impact and Assessment**

It is important to understand what Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis represents in the race and gender conflicted society of today. She is a beacon of hope, a model American in every sense of the word. Her important contributions to the literary and political world are unprecedented and will forever change the way African and African-American culture is viewed. Many of her pupils and colleagues have remarked on the immense contributions her work has given to the development of their own research and areas of interest. Not only has DeCosta-Willis contributed to the advancement of Afro-Hispanic literature on a global scale, but she stands as a representative of just how important black women are to American History and culture. Her brave acts of leadership during the Civil Rights Era can be seen as major milestones for both African-Americans and for women in the United States. As a woman, a mother, a scholar, an

activist, and a writer, DeCosta-Willis has given her heart and soul to defying the odds and changing the world for the better. With the influence of her parents and loved ones, as an activist for equality she has made this mission her life long goal.

Dr. DeCosta-Willis does make it clear that her time at JHU was crucial to her development as a scholar, and that has allowed her to grow into the woman she is today. Her time at JHU was focused on getting her M.A. and Ph.D. But it was also about much more; it was about learning and growing. During this critical period in her life, she not only managed to carve out a niche for herself in an all white, all male, social and professional environment, but she also transformed this environment on both personal and institutional scales. Dr. DeCosta-Willis was also able to apply her experience at JHU to her fight for civil rights, and later to expanding the field of Spanish Literature and Language to encompass the African Diaspora as well. She also noted how her experience at Hopkins introduced her to a Jewish population that she had never truly been able to experience before. Thus, over the relatively short period of time Dr. DeCosta-Willis spent at JHU, she grew close to people outside of her race, and outside of her gender as well as changing their views by her warmth, her supreme intellect, and her model example. This liberating experience is reflected in her literary work and activism of today and has left a lasting imprint on our institution as well – particularly for all those students who have tried to follow in her path.

A crucial component to Dr. DeCosta-Willis is her shared dedication to her scholarly work and her family. While attending JHU she was both a mother and scholar. Being torn between these two very important positions was central point of conflict for DeCosta-Willis, and is one that many women deal with even today. It is powerful, confident, and driven women like DeCosta-Willis that prove this double life is possible. Not only did she prove the possibility

through her monumental accomplishments but she stands as proof that the female mind is not solely for mothering. It is one that can span many plains, and actually change the world on scholarly and intellectual levels. This defiance of the odds and success as a black, female scholar truly captures her legacy and importance, in both Johns Hopkins and US history. The characteristics she possesses are exactly what this school promotes. Dedication to hard work, determination, focus, and defying the odds, whether it be in the political, medical, or scholarly realms, is exactly what JHU emphasizes and strives to develop among its student populations, undergraduate and graduate, today. Thus it is men and women like Dr. DeCosta-Willis that helped to mold that standard at Johns Hopkins. Her legacy is experienced every day.

As I interviewed this astonishing woman I could not quite grasp just how important her life accomplishments had been. Her apartment was warm, and felt like a home. Yet it was exotic and different. African art, sculptures and paintings and cultural artifacts, made her home decadent yet modest. I felt I had been transported to a different world. DeCosta-Willis had a warm, motherly smile, which seemed to be comforting. But at the same time, I was intimidated by the number of path-breaking books that I knew she had written and her vast global knowledge. She is a woman with intellectual dominance, yet her mannerisms kept me calm and safe. Somehow Dr. DeCosta-Willis can intertwine her scholarly wisdom and maternal protectiveness to make a complete stranger feel at home.

This was an enlightening experience for me, and as I develop and grow as a student and researcher it is one I hope I can someday understand and emulate. Dr. DeCosta-Willis opened up, allowing me to hear her story. This experience was more than a free trip to Washington, D.C. to meet an interesting woman and important scholar. It is an experience that has forced me to reflect on my own life, and to question where I am headed, both as a student and as an African-

American male at Johns Hopkins University. Is the fight Miriam DeCosta-Willis fought in the 1960s one of the past? She would disagree. As she explains how she feels about where Johns Hopkins University has developed as a multicultural institution, she notes, "I really question whether the administration has a firm commitment to change and to reflecting the multicultural ethnicity of this country." This is in reference to how JHU allocates its funds, as well as its priorities within its academic curriculum. Dr. DeCosta-Willis does recognize the increase in diversity among Hopkins students since she studied on the Homewood campus, and the crucial breakthroughs JHU has accomplished in terms of improving the quality of life for humankind. Yet, she feels this school has not gone as far as it needs to, with regard to promoting a multicultural and diverse learning environment for its students. This valid point made by Dr. DeCosta Willis opens the door for young adults like myself, and others within the JHU community to follow in her footsteps, whether that be through political activism or scholarly work, there is still more change needed for the future.