

African Americans at Johns
Hopkins University:
Katrina Bell McDonald,
Ph.D.

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“There’s the wife thing, the mother thing, the daughter thing, the teacher thing, the volunteer thing ... but I’ve always been that way. I can’t live unless I’m too involved,”¹ says Professor Katrina Bell

McDonald in a 2001 interview on the “Issues of Identity.” She goes on to prove this statement in many ways during an interview this African Americans at Johns Hopkins University project research team conducted with her in November of 2006. Here, we get a glimpse of her busy life, social advocate concerns, unique professor-ism, dynamic personality, and the motivation behind it all – her genuine concern for the welfare and well-being of people.

Associate professor of Sociology here at the Johns Hopkins University Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Professor McDonald has been with the university for 12 years. She joined the faculty in 1994 as an Instructor after completing her doctoral study at the University of California, Davis. Before settling on a career in sociology Professor McDonald’s career aspirations included both singing and journalism. Since honing in on her role as sociologist and professor of Sociology McDonald has done research and taught classes on a variety of topics ranging from the relationships ties among black women to the life outcome gap between black and white inner city children, to residential mobility. She recently published her first book, Embracing Sisterhood: Class, Identity,

¹ Simpson, Joanne C.. “Issues of Identity” Johns Hopkins Magazine, 2001.
<<http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/0601web/issues.html>>

and Contemporary Black Women, where she analyzes ideas of black womanhood and sisterhood, and also how black women of different social backgrounds value these focal points in the ways in which they “embrace Oprah Winfrey.” She is “currently crafting new research on the determinants of successful marriage among African Americans.”² She has written a number of scholarly articles and has been recognized for her innovative teaching and research among other honors. In addition, earlier this year McDonald was awarded full-tenure at Hopkins. Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. was right to award her a “Woman on the Move” Award in 2003 and she remains so today.

“There were plenty of people who were saying ‘Why in the world would you want to go to Johns Hopkins and be a lone duck?’” Professor McDonald recalls. However, after receiving a letter from Hopkins in response to her application, while still a graduate student at UCD, saying “we are interested, send us more,” and surviving the “gruesome” application/interview process McDonald settled in at Hopkins and has been here every since. McDonald speaks of the Sociology department here at Hopkins with pride. “When I came here the department was extremely inviting.” McDonald admits to initially feeling somewhat bothered by being “one of only four faculty of color [at the time of her arrival] ... all in different departments,” but “felt that the [sociology] department itself beyond the diversity [issues] would help sustain [her].”³ It is a good thing that her interests at Hopkins have sustained McDonald because her presence here has added so much value to the JHU community.

A woman of many hats, even with the family and global issues she has had to struggle with in her life, McDonald is able to play all her many social roles without

²“Katrina Bell McDonald, Ph.D.” Johns Hopkins University Department of Sociology. Johns Hopkins University. 2004. <<http://www.soc.jhu.edu/people/mcdonald/index.html>>

³ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006.

stopping to catch her breath. “A dedicated researcher ... She is also a teacher, mentor, choral singer, violinist, mother, wife and stepmother, volunteer, Sunday school teacher, and daughter of a proud single mom.”⁴ McDonald proves herself to be “a rock” – someone who is strong enough for others to lean on and takes pleasure in being so – for everyone she knows. In her family, she is the rock that cares for her sick mother while never complaining about late night hospital runs or early trips to the grocery store; all while being an active Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) member at Baltimore City College High School, where her son will be graduating from this academic year; and still making time to prepare home-cooked meals, spend time with her loving husband, and take trips with the newest member of her family, their dog. In the academic setting, in addition to her professor duties, McDonald serves as a faculty advisor to undergraduate and graduate level students alike, mentors students in their research and career paths, and serves as one of the prominent “minority voices” on many university counsels and committees dealing with policy and developmental change at Hopkins. And she does it all for the love of people.

McDonald expressed in the interview that her role as a teacher is vital to her – her “calling” in a sense. “I feel very strongly about teaching,” McDonald said. “There is no reason for me to stand in front of a classroom and not ensure that the majority of the class is getting the material ... I do what I can to make sure students get what they need. So I hope students remember that as genuine despite the frustrations they may have about how hard my work is at times.”⁵ McDonald stands out as a professor, as evident in a 1999 Hopkins Gazette article about her winning a JHU teaching award. “McDonald is known

⁴Simpson, Joanne C.. “Issues of Identity” *Johns Hopkins Magazine*. 2001.
<<http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/0601web/issues.html>>

⁵ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

for leading demanding and engaging classes that involve lively class discussion and analysis of the latest research- all hallmarks of a good teacher,” the article states. A few years ago she created the social statistics course here at Hopkins, which has become popular, because she “felt that [her] students have a right to take a statistics course with a social science application to it.”

In this article, McDonald labels her teaching style as “honest”⁶ and she supports this in her interview with us.

Without reservation she says, “I have to admit that sometimes I’m harder on my African American students because I feel somewhat frustrated by the fact that, despite



coming to Hopkins on their own credentials, [these African American students] are coming from public education institutions that haven’t prepared them well, and they don’t recognize that ... I try my best to be compassionate in explaining to the students that I need [them] to raise the bar.” While she shows that she is ready and willing to push her black students, she extends this offer to all her students and hopes that they appreciate her commitment to their education.

When it comes to her family, McDonald is grateful that those who love her understand her passion for teaching. She says that her husband feels strong about the teacher part of her. “He always says, ‘you’re a teacher first.’ ... everyone in my family recognizes that this is my destiny.” Her love for her family is evident when she mentions them and while her teacher role is a major priority of hers, it is clear that daughter,

⁶ Sneiderman, Phil. “1999 Teaching Awards.” *The Gazette Online*. 1999. Johns Hopkins University. <<http://www.jhu.edu/~gazette/1999/may2499/24teach2.html>>

mother, and wife are at the top of the list. She says she feels, and her family accepts, that she is where she needs to be “to challenge and be challenged.”⁷

In her attempt to help the Hopkins community grow, McDonald extends herself as a resource far beyond what is required or expected of her. She makes herself accessible to all, especially students, and “despite her demanding research and teaching schedule, students say McDonald is the type of professor who always keeps her door open.”⁸ “I give students a great deal of access to me,” McDonald says. “[For instance], I had office hours at my house the other day.” In addition to offering her time and expertise to students she also extends her home to African American students in need. Over the years she has had several undergraduate and graduate students live in her home for periods of time of up to a year. This room frequented by black students is “affectionately called by students the home of wayward Negroes,” she says with a chuckle. She offers this space to those who are “sick, tired, sick and tired, whatever,” and is “delighted that students feel comfortable even asking [to stay with her].” Some may ask why she specifies that this refuge is offered to African American student. In an unrelated portion of the interview she makes the following point, which I feel may shed some light on this: “It’s enough to be the odd person on campus – you can’t walk that alone ... Sometimes you have to be brave enough to ask for help.”⁹ I think she offers this aid to African American students in that they are disadvantaged by the real barriers they face in the nation in general, but at Hopkins in particular. While she did not elaborate on why students usually choose to seek shelter in her home, I would guess that it is based on her inviting nature and sense that

⁷ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

⁸ Sneiderman, Phil. “1999 Teaching Awards.” *The Gazette Online*. 1999. Johns Hopkins University. <<http://www.jhu.edu/~gazette/1999/may2499/24teach2.html>>

⁹ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

she supports her black students even if they feel no one else does. With that in mind, I could not see her as being the type of person to refuse this sanctuary to students of any race if they needed her help.

Her ethnicity and her gender are assets she brings to the university in hopes of bettering the JHU community. “There’s no denying that as an African American woman I bring a particular kind of perspective ... in my passion for certain subjects, the way in which I even deliver a lecture ... The maternal instinct that I carry, that is culturally shaped, that I bring to the classroom. All of this provides for new avenues for learning and expression that I hope my students will appreciate.” McDonald goes on to say, “More often than not I’m called on by the university to help shape policy around minority students’ matters ... the university recognizes that I may have something to offer.” Clearly confident in her minority status, what it represents, and the value of such assets,

McDonald makes these attributes accessible to her students and the university at large. “It is important [to me] that people feel comfortable tapping into what it is I offer ... as a black woman.”¹⁰



In addition to her teaching role, McDonald hopes that her researcher role will be a part of her Hopkins legacy years from now. “I hope that my research work enlightens people ... [and] gives them something to chew on,” she says. “If my work inspires people to perhaps think about going back to school again or think about investigating some social issue that they have thought about in the past ... or even empowers people to a new

¹⁰ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

level of understanding [I will be satisfied].” She is excited about her research and the responses she has received from people so far have exceeded her expectations in terms of both depth and scope. And while her work tends to focus on African American relations the themes it covers and results it yields reach out to people of all races, ethnicities, and social backgrounds. Again, she stresses that her research, like her teaching, is done with a genuine concern for people and their well being in mind. “In both [my teaching and my research] I hope that people recognize my sincerity,”¹¹ she says.

Professor McDonald’s research projects have covered numerous sociological areas including African American mothers and families.¹² One common link between all of these pursuits seems to be the level of prestige they lend to the already exemplary Hopkins reputation

Early in her stay at Hopkins, Professor McDonald researched and provided information for seminars focused on families in black culture. From this early point and for several years, McDonald provided valuable insight on African-American families and



their structural elements. In 1994, she worked on maternal stability in the family unit. This led to research about early childbearing and the social support structures involved in these processes. In 1996, McDonald published her findings on these very

questions.¹³ The value of these pursuits is seen in her ability to interject perspective into

¹¹ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

¹² McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006.

these issues. Not satisfied to tackle the question in one light, Professor McDonald recognizes race, gender, and class as factors in any social inquiry.

Moved by the potential of the work, Professor McDonald received many grants from the institution to continue the work on family structure. She was awarded an incentive grant in 1999 to continue work on the Baltimore study of former teen mothers and their residential mobility. By 2000 this research began to formulate interesting discussion. In a discussion combining the focus of race and gender, McDonald was involved in a presentation specifically about the mobility of these family units that she had been studying so diligently.¹⁴ Compounded by her research from several years earlier (1997) on Black Activist Mothering, McDonald was able to discuss the motivations and the potential actions of mothers in disadvantaged situations. Especially important about this discussion was the fact that it was a local seminar held in Baltimore, Maryland. The message it sends to the greater academic community is one of ownership of this issue and concept. By presenting this information so close to the Hopkins campus (and from a Hopkins professor) it solidifies Johns Hopkins as a leader in this sort of research.

After the successes of this endeavor, Professor McDonald was rewarded with a New Program Development Grant.¹⁵ This allowed her to study a way to develop a measure of gender and ethnic identity for African-American women. The purpose of this was to reach the ultimate goal of finding out how these factors affect health and actions within the group. By 2001, she had published a review of black culture and its current

¹³ “Katrina Bell McDonald, Ph.D.” Johns Hopkins University Department of Sociology. Johns Hopkins University. 2006. <http://www.soc.jhu.edu/people/mcdonald/documents/katrinaVitae_8-06.pdf>

¹⁴ “Katrina Bell McDonald, Ph.D.” Johns Hopkins University Department of Sociology. Johns Hopkins University. 2006. <http://www.soc.jhu.edu/people/mcdonald/documents/katrinaVitae_8-06.pdf>

¹⁵ “Katrina Bell McDonald, Ph.D.” Johns Hopkins University Department of Sociology. Johns Hopkins University. 2006. <http://www.soc.jhu.edu/people/mcdonald/documents/katrinaVitae_8-06.pdf>

standing in an inner city environment. This kind of research is extremely important for major cities with a majority black population: Baltimore included. This kind of research allows great insight into the local community and helps all in close proximity to learn about these situations.¹⁶ It also allowed her to publish another work in 2002 about the confluence of race, gender and the economic condition in the inner city.



It is specifically this level of insight and grasp of these topics that led to Katrina McDonald increasing the reputation of Johns Hopkins once again in 2003. In a local convention in Maryland she was

a keynote speaker American Association of University Women. The topic of this presentation centered on 21st Century Challenges for African American Women.¹⁷ This accomplishment is representative of two distinct milestones in Professor McDonald's career. Firstly, she is widely recognized as a prominent member of academia, and a role model for women in the system. Secondly, Johns Hopkins is now more strongly associated with fostering the endeavors of women in academia.

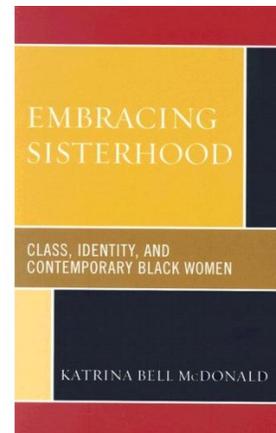
As social justice for the disenfranchised has continuously been the pursuit of Katrina McDonald, the aforementioned accomplishments speak to winning the fight toward this goal. However, just as learning is a continuous process so is this fight and by extension the research into these social questions.

¹⁶ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

¹⁷ "Katrina Bell McDonald, Ph.D." Johns Hopkins University Department of Sociology. Johns Hopkins University. 2006. <http://www.soc.jhu.edu/people/mcdonald/documents/katrinaVitae_8-06.pdf>

Continuing the work on the family unit Professor McDonald was able to explain the issues on a more philosophic and systemic level, and in 2003 she was part of discussion of racial and ethnic identity formation. This sort of insight helped develop new ideas on collection and interpretation of family data. Armed with this knowledge, McDonald was able to continue the study of these concepts. In 2004 McDonald presented to the American Sociological Association a more in-depth picture of residential mobility and disadvantaged mothers. By this point Professor McDonald had clearly become a recognized expert on these social issues, and the success speaks highly of the University's reputation.¹⁸

Not content to rest on her laurels, McDonald continued to ever expand her scope. By 2005 she formulated a question about the status of minority faculty in schools ranging from Kindergarten to twelfth grade. All of these inquiries lead to yet another discussion in 2005, one examining the entirety of black advancement in the previous forty years. Eventually, all of this research in and connectivity to black culture culminated in McDonald's most recent publication, previously mentioned. This consistently multifaceted approach to social issues is clearly one important ingredient to her success.¹⁹



One of the reasons this research is important is the effect it has on Johns Hopkins University and the community it rests within. As per a recent interview with Professor McDonald, one of the concerns of the local Baltimore community is the encroachment of

¹⁸ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006.

¹⁹ "Katrina Bell McDonald, Ph.D." Johns Hopkins University Department of Sociology. Johns Hopkins University. 2006. <http://www.soc.jhu.edu/people/mcdonald/documents/katrinaVitae_8-06.pdf>

Johns Hopkins into Baltimore ideologically.²⁰ By having a prominent member of the faculty active in researching the concerns and issues pertinent to the local community, Johns Hopkins is also associated with working towards solving these social dilemmas.

Moreover, this same interview speaks to a historical concern within the university. As mentioned, Professor McDonald recalls when she entered the ranks of Johns Hopkins the limited amount of professors and students of African-American association.²¹ Through her success in academia, she serves as a role model for all involved in the university. Other professors see her success and may wish to be associated with such an environment. Students may look up to this strong and intelligent woman, and by extension be inspired by her work.

To draw these concepts together, one could argue that the sum of these ideas are greater than each individual part. Her research is insightful and answers social questions from various perspectives. Her discussions and presentations disseminate this information in a way that improves her personal standing and the Universities reputation. Her efforts help galvanize two distinct generations to improve themselves in the university structure, students and professors alike. All of these by themselves are exemplary. However, when considered together they have an even more powerful effect. All of these ideas coalesce to form a unity within the Hopkins campus and include the local culture. It is these bonds that create a better community, and therefore a better learning environment. It is these successes that snowball as time goes on to improve the lives of the people she contacts in her academic journey.

²⁰ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006.

²¹ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006.

Though she has contributed to the community in so many ways, one of the most visible ways has been her involvement in the creation of the Center for Africana Studies. In 2002, Professor McDonald was selected to be on a task force to create this center.²² With other Johns Hopkins professors, she was instrumental in making the much-awaited center a reality. Since her involvement on the task force, Professor McDonald has remained involved in the Center for Africana Studies. In teaching classes such as “The African American Family” and “Contemporary Perspectives in Race Relations”, McDonald has remained close to the center. And, as it is now in its 3rd full year running, the center is becoming more and more established through such acts as hiring its first permanent director, Ben Vinson.²³



As one of the first African American professors on the Hopkins campus, Professor McDonald faced an uncomfortable beginning as a professor.²⁴ But in the same way that she paved the path for other African American professors to go to Hopkins,

²² Small, Glenn. Task Force Charts Course for African, African-American Studies. *The Gazette Online*. Johns Hopkins University, 2002. <<http://www.jhu.edu/~gazette/2002/13may02/13africa.html>>

²³ Rienzi, Greg. Next Up for Africana Studies. *The Gazette*. Johns Hopkins University, 2006. <<http://www.jhu.edu/gazette/2006/10jul06/10africa.html>>

²⁴ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

she also helped pave the path for the Center for Africana Studies. Professor McDonald has said that in her classroom, she values a diverse set of opinions very much.²⁵ In her mind, that is one of the main values of diversity in a University, to get a differing set of backgrounds, cultures, and opinions. In the creation of the Center for Africana Studies, we see that same value of diverse opinions. Professor McDonald's philosophy in her classroom seems to have carried over to the center. This can be seen through both the format of the center and its description. On the Center for Africana Studies website, the program is described in this way: "The Center for Africana Studies offers a broad inquiry into the ideas and experiences of African peoples on the continent of Africa, in the Americas, and elsewhere around the globe."²⁶ Professor McDonald is pleased at the direction the program is taking. This is not surprising as it mirrors one of her own philosophies in her classroom. It is also vital to the Center that it takes an interdisciplinary approach to education. That is to say that, it combines classes from all over Johns Hopkins to learn about African culture all over the world. Not only does this allow for students to learn about all aspects of African culture, it also allows for all teachers to add something to the wealth of knowledge in the center. Professor McDonald's own philosophy of teaching has clearly added to the Center for Africana Studies because of this.

What is most important in her involvement in the Center, though, is that the Center provides a place for her to leave her legacy here at Hopkins. Being one of the members of the task force, Professor McDonald will be studied by future students for this great accomplishment. Professor McDonald is an accomplished sociology professor who

²⁵ McDonald, Katrina B. Personal interview. 9 November 2006

²⁶"Center for African Studies." Johns Hopkins University Center for Africana Studies. Johns Hopkins University. 2006. <<http://web.jhu.edu/africana>>

is much respected in her field. However, being African American is a large part of who she is and what she does. Because of this it is no surprise that her research deals mostly with African American families and women. If she weren't a part of both of these groups, her research would potentially be quite different. In addition, her involvement in the university has been important largely because she is an African American woman. Carrying on her legacy as such is important because it highlights the value of diversity and the African American presence at Hopkins. The Center for Africana Studies is a place that will continue to stress the significance of embracing the resources of persons of African descent, in addition to that of all people. In only 12 years at Hopkins, Professor McDonald has accomplished a great deal. She has started new classes in the sociology department, shared her research with her students, and filled many other roles. But her role in the Center for Africana Studies is important because it sets an example for all professors to value diversity in the classroom. What the Center will do is make sure that her importance and philosophy of teaching will be carried on. It promotes the kind of education through research and value of differing opinions that seem to make Professor McDonald a special teacher at Hopkins. She is special because of what she has done here. What she has done here, regardless of race, is important. But it is vital to recognize that she would not be the same person if she were not African-American. Her teachings would be different, her philosophy might be different, and her life might be different. Recognizing this is one of the points of the Center for Africana Studies and the main point of the African Americans at JHU research project. The importance of Professor McDonald being African American is vital to who she is, what the Center for Africana Studies is, and what Johns Hopkins is.



To conclude, Professor McDonald is vital to the Johns Hopkins community in many different ways. Her identity as an African American, a mother, a teacher, and a researcher is very important to her and to the Hopkins community. Her

research and her involvement in the Center for Africana Studies are concrete evidence of what she has done. But her many roles at Hopkins go far beyond that. Being African American is fundamental to Professor McDonald's identity and importance, just as Professor McDonald is fundamental to the Hopkins community.