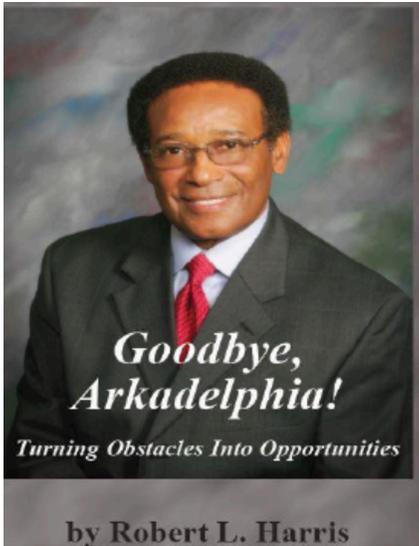


ROBERT L. HARRIS - April 2018

Robert L. Harris: 1963 Merritt Alumnus, Attorney, and Author Broke a Lifetime of Barriers



From a two-room schoolhouse in Arkansas, to the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington D.C., Robert Lewis Harris has always fought for what he thought was fair and equal treatment of all Americans.

The Deep South transplant, who traveled West and graduated from Oakland Tech High School before heading to Merritt in the turbulent '60s, Harris went on to practice law and argue a case before the highest court in the country. And he did it by following a moral compass that, like the title of his autobiography puts it, turned "obstacles into opportunities."

It all started in 1960, when, as a newly arrived high school senior in Oakland, Harris decided that the first thing he had to do was talk to a counselor about enrolling in college-prep classes. He had recently arrived on a bus from the then-segregated Arkadelphia, Arkansas, where he started his education in a two-room schoolhouse and spent his mornings before school picking cotton with his parents and five siblings.

His parents, however, saw a future for their son in something quite different.

"My mother always said that the only way to achieve liberation is to have an education," says Harris, who excelled in academics, despite the odds. "She'd always say it's something no one can take away from you."

So when his counselor refused to let him take the high-level classes, telling the young man that "with your background you'll never be able to make it," Harris wasn't going to take no for an answer. He called on his 6-foot-4, 250-pound brother-in-law to convince the counselor that she should give Harris the chance to show that he could.

It would not be the first time that Harris refused to take no for an answer for what he thought was fair. In fact, his tenacious spirit and determination to succeed would lead to a lifetime of breaking barriers. That path began during his early school years and continued throughout his illustrious career as a college student, law school graduate, national fraternity president, national law association president, and civil-rights activist, ultimately becoming an attorney and business executive for a Fortune 500 company.

But it was at Merritt College, then Oakland Junior College located on Grove Street, where the rumblings of civic unrest were beginning to take place, that gave Harris an inkling of an idea that he could help bring about justice in the world.

"I went to Merritt at first because it was affordable," says Harris. "There were a good number of African-American students there, including Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, who had not yet founded the Black Panthers, but it was clearly the beginning of a movement where changes would be happening."

Once Harris graduated from Merritt, he transferred to San Francisco State where he studied sociology and criminology, graduating in 1965 and landing a job as an Alameda County probation officer. After four years in that position, where he helped rehabilitate young offenders, Harris heard from a colleague that UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law was recruiting African-American students.

“I hadn’t thought about law school,” Harris recalls, “but I’d seen enough of the injustices and discrimination in society that were happening in the ‘60s, and it was just at the time when Martin Luther King, Jr. had been killed while fighting for civil rights, so I felt I might have some impact in the legal area and help change the course of history if I studied law.”

His acceptance to the law school put him among just 12 African Americans in a class of 330. By the time he graduated, Harris had made a name for himself with his scholarly achievements, serving as editor of the Law Review and officer of his local fraternity.

He would go on to get his first job as a corporate attorney at Pacific Gas & Electric where he would make a name for himself, including one of the proudest moments of his career in 1985—the enviable feat of going all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to argue a First Amendment case—and winning! The case would go down in history and give Harris the elite status of appearing before the High Court, something only a very small percentage of attorneys ever do, and even a smaller margin of African-American attorneys.

“My colleagues all told me that my case would never even be accepted,” says Harris of his Supreme Court appearance. “But that made me want it even more. It was a high point of my career.” Harris went on to spend the rest of his career at PG&E, eventually moving into the operations side as Vice President of Environmental Affairs. Upon retirement in 2007.

Harris looks back on a storied and groundbreaking career in which he accomplished his goal of reaching new heights for himself and paving the way for future generations of young Black men just like himself. After being urged for years by colleagues and friends to put his life story into words, in 2017 Harris published his book, “Good-bye Arkadelphia: Turning Obstacles into Opportunities.”

The Merritt community and all community members are invited to meet and ask questions of Robert Harris on Wednesday, April 9, at 11:30 a.m., as he recalls his Merritt memories, talks about his lifetime of achievements, and reads from his autobiography. Don’t miss this opportunity to meet one of Merritt’s most esteemed alumni!

—Susan May