PHYLLIS WASHINGTON STONE

(Class of 1980)

Phyllis Washington came to Notre Dame in autumn 1976 from Chicago. She majored in American Studies and was a cheerleader. After graduation she worked as a Notre Dame admissions counselor for five years, then spent almost thirty years in marketing with Merck Sharp & Dohme. She now is a corporate executive coach and leadership consultant. She and her husband, Jim Stone (Class of 1981), live in Somerset, New Jersey.

Lead me, guide me, along the way.
For if you lead me, I cannot stray.
Lord, let me walk each day with thee.
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.
(Doris Akers)

I'VE ALWAYS FELT THAT GOD HAS BEEN LEADING ME ON A journey; thus I have no regrets about anything that happens along the way. So how could I have not chosen Notre Dame? Besides, by choosing Notre Dame I became more deeply connected to the greatest woman ever to walk this earth-Mary, the Mother of God. So I would, without a doubt, make the same choice again.

I have been Catholic since birth, and my roots in Catholicism go back further than I know. One grandmother was educated by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, founded by Saint Katherinc Drexel, a pioneer of civil rights and social activism. St. Katherine and her sisters courageously stood in the service of black and Native American children. Granny Grace- "GG" -was one of chose children. GG was forever grateful to Katherine Drexel. My other grandmother, Caribel, was African Methodist Episcopal (AME), but had my father raised Catholic because of something she saw in the faith.

For a short time in my life, my parents were also active as Unitarians, so much of what I learned about whites growing up on the South Side of Chicago was through our membership in the Unitarian church, my parents' white friends and co-workers, and the brief· period when a white couple lived with us. Notre Dame changed that.

I almost missed the Notre Dame experience. If it hadn't been for Mom and Dad, who said, "What about Notre Dame?" the university would never have come to my mind. Religion was not a factor in my selection, yet the aspect of faith turned out to be most critical to my learning. My response to Mom and Dad's question was, "Where's that?" As it turned out, just ninety miles down the road. And had it not been for Deborah Childs, a classmate from Clarksville, Tennessee, I might not have ended up at Notre Dame. Deb and I visited the campus the same day, and as a result of our meeting, I said, "Why not?" The fact that the university was nearly all-white did not deter me. All the schools I was considering were predominantly white anyway.

Little did I know that there would be only nine black women in the 1976 entering class. (Yikes!) But I felt almost immediately that I fit in, especially with those nine women. So deep in my heart and early on, I knew that I was in the right place. I don't recall ever doubting that.

There were white friends who gravitated towards us and we to them. Separately, each of us nine also had a circle of white friends. How could we not? The majority of the nine were housed in Lewis Hall, where it was rumored most black girls were housed. And after the first year, I was able to room with Ramona Payne from Cincinnati, Ohio, one of the nine. In hindsight, I was grateful for that because it allowed us to form connections close enough to have lasted even to today.

Dorm life was a blast-and I have pictures to prove it. There are photos of us climbing the large trees near the statue of Father Sorin when autumn arrived; photos of us gathering outside of South Dining

Hall with other black students, rocking to New York beats from Stan Wilcox's boom box. While getting a great education, we made the most of our Notre Dame experience, and most of us graduated with gratitude for what we gained from the university as well as what we contributed.

In my world in Chicago, I had never known football, except that the men in my family gathered on autumn Sundays to watch "Da Bears." Participative sports in general were not that big in our family. We were, by and large, writers, readers, dancers, singers, eaters, and talkers. In high school I ventured into cheerleading for Hales Franciscan, the black Catholic boys' school nearest to St. Thomas Apostle, my black Catholic girls' school, and was selected as captain of the squad. One year Hales won the city championship in basketball. So while I knew nothing about Fighting Irish football and national championships, I did know something about being a cheerleader and about cheering for a winning team. That drew me to try out for cheerleading at Notre Dame.

The tryout my freshman year, although daunting, felt like a good fit. Cheerleading was familiar territory, and I enjoyed the dancing and the calisthenics. But it turned out to be one of my earliest run-ins with racism at the university. I had a little fan club of blacks *and* whites from Lewis Hall cheering me on. Notre Dame was in its fifth year of coeducation, but my fear wasn't about being on display as a woman among many males. For me it was about being on display as a black among many whites. There had been a black cheerleader before me and, thanks to her and others, I learned that some of the judges, all of them white, had given me zeros before I even began my routines. Once out in the open, this undeniable racism didn't sit well with the black student community. And there were other racially suspect practices causing unrest-the overall lack of black student representation, the noticeably absent photos of black students in campus publications, campus security stereotyping and hassling black males unnecessarily, students assuming that every black male was there to play some sport, and others. So we protested on the stairs of the Administration Building until Father Hesburgh agreed to meet with us. In addition to hearing our demands, Father Hesburgh "appointed" my black male cheerleading partner and me to the squad. This, of course, jarred the campus, but there I was. At the end of that season I tried out again for the following year. In that second round, not only did I achieve the highest final score of all women participating in the tryouts, my cheer mates looked beyond color to "elect" me as captain.

Another negative experience for me included having to go all the way up to the provost to obtain a grade I legitimately earned-in theology, of all courses. One engineering professor cared enough to sit me down to tell me that I could not be an engineer *and* a cheerleader. I chose cheerleading and American Studies. It could be a lonely life as a black female engineering student at Notre Dame, and I wanted to be able to look back and say, "I was happy at Notre Dame." There were many experiences like this-of blacks having a harder time proving themselves and prevailing in the end. It's the way of our world.

Most importantly, I cherished the deep faith connection that, for me as for many black students, Catholic and not, grew ever stronger. This aspect of my experience supports that I made the right college decision. I am who I am today in part because my adult journey began at Notre Dame.

I got it in my mind early that I had just as much right to be there as anyone. We all felt the same way. And Notre Dame is just as much my alma mater as any alumnus's. There may have been times early on when I felt academically inferior because I was coming from an educational background that was certainly inferior to that of most Notre Dame students. Although my high school was Catholic, it was inner-city and black, with many girls from the projects. So we were short-changed in many ways. My high school didn't even offer a senior math or science class, so I attended a local junior college to take calculus and got a tutor for physics. So while I struggled early at Notre Dame, I graduated with a pretty decent grade point average and have done pretty well for myself.

Notre Dame was never a consideration until my parents brought it to my attention. I had no family affiliation as so many white students do. I still don't. But my husband, Jim Stone (Class of 1981), established a legacy. Two of his four brothers (Dan and Chris) are Notre Dame graduates, as is a first cousin (Mel Tardy) and most recently a distant cousin, Holden Lombard, the first black in twenty years to graduate with a degree in physics. And there are two other relatives of Jim's who attend Notre Dame as current students. My son, Alex Stone, and daughter-in-law, Fatimah, now work at the university. So our family connections are growing, and I hope that Alex and Fatimah have a good enough experience that they won't someday leave with

regrets, as so many black faculty, staff, and students do. I want them to have the love for the place that Jim and I have.

There are lots of great things that Notre Dame has become, and I don't have to call them out-they're obvious. I encountered and still encounter some of the finest people in the world there. But I also do not have to point out that racial and ethnic inclusiveness is *not* among those great advancements. In this day and age, I'm not sure why it should still be such a hard thing. As *the* premier Catholic university in the world, we should be at the forefront of what it means to be inclu- sive and welcoming. Instead, we still put up too many barriers, ob- stacles, and restraints that make it almost impossible to even remotely reflect the face of the real world. We have many miles to go before we can say that it's a good fit for most black students. I'm not sure we'll ever get there.

I believe first and foremost that Notre Dame needs to define what inclusion means for a school like ours, given our mission. We also need a shared vision of what that looks like in terms of student make-up and environment, and then develop a real strategy to move to a place where we admittedly feel comfortable. Maybe in the end that level of comfort turns out to be right where we are, but at least we'll know.

With all its faults, I consider myself blessed to have attended Notre Dame and will be eternally grateful to my parents. I proudly claim Notre Dame as my own, and I give back what I can because I choose to help the university advance to the extent that it can. I am black Irish, like it or not. (Literally. I completed one of those DNA tests and I am 20 percent of Irish ancestry. Who knew?) That has *got* to be divine guidance for my journey.