

Dr. Marguerite Ross Barnett: The Legacy Lives on

By Tiffany Lucky



Dr. Marguerite Ross Barnett's
daughter, Amy Dubois Barnett

Dr. Marguerite Ross Barnett
Chancellor
1986-1991

Chancellor Marguerite Ross Barnett helped transform the University of Missouri-St. Louis from an emerging campus to a nationally recognized metropolitan research university. The Missouri State honors Dr. Barnett's many accomplishments that included increasing academic scholarship, solid academic programs, including doctoral degrees in biology, physics and political science, and the expansion of the science complex and the Thomas Jefferson Library which now houses the John A. Creasey Library.

Chancellor Barnett set the University of Missouri-St. Louis on the path to achieve the university's mission. Dr. Barnett believed every individual should receive a quality education and career readiness. She was responsible for establishing the Missouri State Program, which has become a national program for students with disabilities. Dr. Barnett's legacy lives on through the university's commitment to excellence and the many achievements of the students.

They say that heroes get remembered, but legends never die. It's been 20 years since the world lost Dr. Marguerite Ross Barnett, the first African-American woman to lead a major university in the U.S. A major force at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), Dr. Barnett's legacy lingers on as she accomplished more in one lifetime than most people accomplish in two.

"The legend of Marguerite Ross Barnett looms large at the University of Missouri-St. Louis—as well it should," Thomas F. George, the current UMSL chancellor told a large crowd during the fundraiser kick off for the Chancellor Marguerite Ross Barnett Memorial Plaza on February 26, 2012. A dedication ceremony of the plaza was held at the university on October 26.

Amy DuBois Barnett, Dr. Barnett's only child, and editor-in-chief of *Ebony*, told the online magazine *The Village Celebration* that that whole day of her mother's dedication was "incredibly emotional."

"It was a coincidence that the event was held on February 26, the 20th anniversary of her death," said the younger Barnett, who was only 22 years old when her mother died. "I can't think of a more fitting way to remember her than in a setting where people were gathering to celebrate her life."

The plaza was implemented to commemorate Dr. Barnett's position as the first black and fifth overall chancellor of UMSL, a position she held from 1986 to 1990. But before that, Dr. Barnett was already renowned nationally as an innovative administrator and scholar who was a visionary ahead of her time.



THE BEGINNINGS

Dr. Barnett was born on May 21, 1942, in Charlottesville, Virginia, to Dewey Ross and Mary (Douglas) Ross, and raised in Buffalo, New York. After she graduated from Bennett High School in 1959, Dr. Barnett studied political science at Antioch College and graduated with an A.B. (Bachelor of Arts degree) in 1964. She then received both a master's degree and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in political science, from the University of Chicago in 1972. Dr. Barnett went on to teach political science at the University of Chicago, Princeton University, Columbia University and Howard University before becoming vice chancellor for academic affairs at City University of New York from 1983 to 1986.

During her time as a professor at various universities, Dr. Barnett managed to edit or write five books.. Her book *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, published by Princeton University Press in 1976, won the Ralph J. Bunche Award on cultural pluralism from the American Political Science Association.

It wasn't long before Dr. Barnett came into her next role, a role that would forever cement her to legendary status: Chancellor of the UMSL.

THE VISIONARY

A headstrong and energetic leader who always aspired to fulfill every goal she set for herself, Dr. Barnett did not hesitate to turn UMSL into what it is today during her tenure as chancellor. One of her first achievements was breaking the school's fundraising records. During her first month at UMSL, John Ashcroft, then governor of Missouri, vetoed a bill that would expand UMSL's Thomas Jefferson Library. Subsequently,

Ashcroft gave Dr. Barnett a challenge: if she raised \$1.2 million, he would approve the remaining \$4.8 million needed for the library's expansion. This seemed like an impossible feat as UMSL had only raised \$30,000 at any given time. But Dr. Barnett not only accepted the challenge, she accomplished it and never looked back.



Looking at her surroundings, Dr. Barnett concluded that metropolitan universities should address regional needs by connecting community and campus resources. "There is a pool of potential talent (of women, disadvantaged minorities and lower-income students), which is under-utilized in our society now," Dr. Barnett said in her first address to UMSL.

"That pool of talent must be developed and encouraged if America is to maintain its position of technological leadership. It is the unique privilege of 20th century American public, urban universities to have the mandate to provide educational opportunity and access to diverse populations."

"The legend of Marguerite Ross Barnett looms large at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, as well it should"

- Thomas F. George

To achieve this, Dr. Barnett launched the Partnership in Progress program, a bundle of educational programs developed to raise mathematics and science literacy among college students. This effort included the UMSL Bridge Program—a year-round pre-collegiate curriculum that gives St. Louis-area middle and high school students access to educational services on campus. Since its inception, the program has continued to grow, and now has roughly 3,000 student participants annually.



The program also has a high success rate; 100 percent of participating graduates complete high school and enroll in post-secondary educational institutions.

So how did Dr. Barnett accomplish this goal of connecting UMSL resources to the St. Louis region? What made a dubious community listen to and heed a vibrant African-American woman who seemed to want

to make the possible impossible? Although it was obvious that there was a need for more programs to assist in the educational transition of urban youth from high school to post-secondary education, Dr. Barnett had a skill that many people often lack: she was an impeccable salesperson who almost singlehandedly recruited corporate donors to support the Partnership in Progress program.



that disadvantaged students were not going to move into science and technology given their high school preparation,” she said. “So companies like Monsanto, McDonnell Douglas and Emerson donated to her programs. She was the right person at the right time.”

The Partnership in Progress program and the Thomas Jefferson Library expansion (which now houses the St. Louis Mercantile Library) were not Dr. Barnett’s only crowning glories while at UMSL. She also initiated a doctoral program in biology with the Missouri Botanical Garden while the university saw a 300-percent increase in private scholarships. And since 1986, when Dr. Barnett joined the university, the number of minority students enrolled at UMSL has doubled, and the diversity of its faculty and staff has tremendously increased.

AFTER UMSL

Sadly for St. Louis, Dr. Barnett left UMSL in 1990, when she was named president of the University of Houston (UH). Not only had she become the first black president of UH, she also broke a record by becoming the first black woman president of a major American university. While the distinction of “first black president” is an honorable recognition, Dr. Barnett never let that racial distinction define her or her career. Soon after she accepted her position at UH, news reporters persistently asked her what it was like to be the first black woman to head a university. To end that conversation, she would turn to Wendy Adair, her assistant, and ask, “How does it feel to be the first red-haired associate vice president of the university?”





Dr. Barnett made sure she carried her same vision of community involvement, economic development, fundraising efforts and diversity initiatives from UMSL to UH. Under Dr. Barnett's leadership, ten new minority faculty members were added, and the Texas Center for University School Partnership, a cooperative effort to unite ventures among business, education and community leaders, was established.

But unfortunately, bleak times loomed ahead. While at UH, Dr. Barnett developed a blood disorder involving hypoglycemia and metastatic cancer. She took a medical leave in November of 1991 to seek treatment. She would not return. Dr. Barnett passed away on February 26, 1992, at Maui Memorial Hospital in Wailuku, Hawaii. She was only 49. The Marguerite Ross Barnett Memorial Scholarship was subsequently set up in her honor.

"Dr. Barnett was a uniquely talented individual who was taken from us much too early," said George. "But ... her legend lives. I feel it at the St. Louis Mercantile Library. I hear it in the voice of alumni who knew Dr. Barnett and now support a scholarship in her name. And I see it in the faces of UMSL students who have benefited from the academic partnerships she created to ensure their progress."

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- Dr. Marguerite Ross Barnett

THE LEGACY

Designed by Austin Tao of The Lawrence Group in St. Louis, the cardinal features of the Chancellor Marguerite Ross Barnett Memorial Plaza are the four granite columns, representing Dr. Barnett's four-year tenure at UMSL. There are four granite walls that emanate between the columns, symbolizing Dr. Barnett's belief that "urban universities should connect community and campus resources in support of education." Benches and ledge rocks of Missouri limestone provide ample seating for visitors, as a likeness of Dr. Barnett, designed by St. Louis sculptor Vicki D. Reid, overlooks the oval plaza. The legacy of Dr. Barnett has—literally—been set in stone.

Dr. Barnett was many things: educator, chancellor, university president, writer, colleague, wife, mother, daughter and friend. But most importantly, she was and will forever be a legend. ■

