

Howard Alumni and Friends Gather to Honor Dr. Lawrence Kaggwa

by Jennifer C. Thomas

Dressed in off-white and donning a straw fedora, Dr. Lawrence Kaggwa was especially relaxed. This was the day dozens of his former students, or as he refers them, “sons and daughters,” would come to share their gratitude, and the retiring Howard University journalism professor did not want to be late.

By the time the celebration formally started, a small crowd had already gathered in the Armour J. Blackburn University Center’s Hilltop Lounge and Terrace, and the 35-year veteran of the School of Communications was already busy glad-handing.

Some were signing personal messages on the poster-size photo of Kaggwa. Surrounding it were artifacts of his legacy: a 1986 front page of The Community News newspaper, which was birthed by Kaggwa to cover news and issues in the area surrounding Howard. For many students in his Fundamentals of Journalism and Reporting and Writing courses, it was required writing, and an initiation of sorts into their major. On the other side of the display— the District Chronicles weekly, which has been going strong since 2001, providing students opportunities in publishing, writing and editing.

“Professors who challenge students are rarely acknowledged for excellence in teaching,” says Carol Dudley, Director of Career Development, SOC alumna, and one of the three organizers of the event. “Journalism graduates not only respect Dr. K for the level of difficulty in his teaching but also for his passion for them to write with accuracy and to practice excellence without excuse.”

The Ugandan native is known as a tough professor with tough standards and a tender heart for those under his tutelage. He received his undergraduate degree in journalism from Rutgers, and went on to obtain a master’s from UCLA and doctorate at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. His journalism experience took him from Omaha, Nebraska and Hartford, Connecticut to Los Angeles. He helped create Norfolk State University’s journalism program, and came to Howard in 1980. Since then, hundreds of graduates hold a bevy of positions within a Who’s Who-list of companies.

More than one hundred former students, colleagues, and well-wishers attended the May 16 alumni-sponsored event, including one of his former Norfolk State students, a May 2015 Howard graduate, and two current Bison whose parents were apprentices of Kaggwa.

“When I think of Howard University, I think of Dr. Kaggwa,” says Shirley Carswell, former deputy managing editor at Washington Post, adjunct professor and event organizer. “The two just go together in my mind, so the thought of Howard without him is almost unimaginable for me and for many of my fellow alum. We all instinctively felt a need to come together to tell him how much we appreciate him, though words seem inadequate, given the mark he’s made on our lives...”

Dozens of those who could not show support in person, sent in sentiments which were displayed in a journal and on a slideshow.

Andrea Morehead Allen, news anchor, WTHR TV 13 NBC, Indianapolis., is among those who “survived” Kaggwa’s class and often despite his urgings, matriculated towards a career in broadcast journalism. ESPN anchor Stan Verrett, CNN correspondent Stephanie Elam, CBS News correspondent Michelle Miller and others paid homage in a video tribute, bringing laughter and some tears.

“You have dedicated your life to schooling us,” Miller smiled from the CBS Evening News set. “You should take a victory lap around the country and the world and visit every single one of us, because we are your legacy; and a life of service and a life of giving to others is a life well lived.”

Former Journalism Department Chair, Phil Dixon, Washington Post reporter Keith Alexander and others spoke from the podium, sharing “Kaggwa-isms” and quips. Public Relations executive Elaine Myada thanked her mentor for his support during and after her pregnancy while she was a student. That baby, Jana, is now in college.

“It was amazing how many people came from so many places to honor Dr. Kaggwa,” says adjunct professor Ron Harris, former reporter for the Los Angeles Times and St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “One of the people told me that Kaggwa’s reach goes far beyond the people he taught. He was telling me how he was teaching someone something the other day about journalism, and he was using the things that Kaggwa taught him. That meant Kaggwa was teaching people he never met.”

The celebration was capped with the announcement of the “Dr. Lawrence Kaggwa Student Scholarship Fund,” established by the School of Communications, “in honor of the professor’s commitment to teaching and service to his sons and daughters.”

After the announcement, the crowd stood to its feet as the man of the hour gave remarks on the industry, education, and commitment to his two major causes-- the District Chronicles, and continued support of students. It is this dedication that he hopes will keep him at the university, despite his formal retirement. Kaggwa is requesting an office which will enable him to keep a parental eye on the District Chronicles.

Having an enduring place at “The Mecca” suits his “children” just fine. A few of “Kaggwa’s Kids” donned freshly-made t-shirts with the moniker. On the back, the phrase which brought an approving nod by their beloved professor, “We don’t die. We multiply. And make deadline.”