

Leadership program was 'love letter' to Black women

Harvard curriculum program helped participants push for voting rights, equity and poverty reduction

Deborah Barfield Berry
USA TODAY

ATLANTA — It was Deborah Scott's turn at the mic during the Zoom meeting.

She rattled off the strengths of Georgia STAND-UP, the nonpartisan civic engagement organization she helped build: Its infrastructure is solid, its staff hard working.

Her newest passion, though, was to build desperately needed affordable housing in Atlanta. She struggled with how to move on from STAND-UP's work to register voters, many of them African American. She worried she'd be letting folks down at her organization.

Her classmates on the call — fellow members of a pilot program at Harvard University aimed at advancing leadership skills of people running programs for Black women and girls in the South — thanked her for being transparent, praised her work. Then they fired off questions: What do you mean by letting people down? What do you owe yourself? What are you trying to hold on to? Why?

"Did I answer the question? I don't know," a flustered Scott said at one point. "This is hard."

Then, Scott went to the "balcony," muting her mic so she could listen but not speak while others in the square boxes of the Zoom discussed how she could develop a succession plan, follow her passion and take a break. Black women they agreed, take on too much.

Parts of it were painful to hear. Not because Scott didn't already know some of the answers, but because the confirmation, while tempered with praise — "We love you, Deb," someone had typed in the chat — was so raw.

"This group doesn't care about offending you," Scott said later. "They want you to be your excellent self and if it takes you being uncomfortable for you to get to your point of greatness, then, 'Oh, well, that's just the cost of doing business.' And I liked that."

It's been more than a year since Scott participated in Harvard's first-ever program aimed at providing these leaders with more tools to run their organizations and navigate spaces that haven't always welcomed or appreciated them.

Today, Scott is using some of what she learned during those four months — to be bolder, to be open to learning new things, to learn more on others — in her get-out-the-vote efforts in Georgia, a battleground in the presidential election. The lessons, she said, helped at a critical time as she and other Black women fight to protect voting rights.

"It's what I needed," she said of the program. "I felt like it was a love letter to Black women."

Expanding on innate skills

Scott and 24 other Black women were part of the inaugural cohort of the "Power, Innovation, and Leadership" executive education program

last year. Some came from the corporate world. Some ran community organizations. Some led wealth equity projects, while others were involved in politics. Several used art to advocate for causes like reducing poverty, advocating for reproductive justice, protecting voting rights.

"Sisters, you are worthy of investment," LaTosha Brown, a national civil rights activist and a founder of the program, told the women. "We see you."

Their work focused on the South, which historically has been a hostile environment for Black people and slow to address disparities. Some say it still is.

Here they were up North at Harvard, an institution that at one time didn't welcome Black students or even women. The initiative was taking place at a time when more institutions, including Harvard, had vowed to step up diversity efforts and try to address systemic inequities.

The hybrid program launched in January 2023 with an in-person orientation at Harvard followed by weekly on-line sessions. It wrapped up four months later when the women returned to campus for more intense sessions, a soul-stirring dinner event and an uplifting closing ceremony.

The women have kept in touch, supporting each other. Plans are under way for the next group in January — this time 40 leaders, including some from across the globe. One goal of the three-year initiative is to create a network of 100 leaders who want to take the work of helping Black women and girls in the South to the next level.

"We shouldn't be complacent," said Julie Battilana, a Harvard professor who helped develop the initiative. "Now, the question is, how do we make it even more helpful to them and to the next generations."

Challenging conventional wisdom

Every Tuesday, the women met on Zoom, sometimes for 90-minute classes taught by Har-

vard professors. There were sessions, among others, on "using your authentic voice," "assessing your sources of power," "overcoming entrenched power" and "building and maintaining your network."

Every other Tuesday, smaller groups met on-line to discuss a leadership challenge one of them faced. In emotional testimonies, each woman unveiled her challenge. Some had played out in real time. Some had haunted them for years. Many were painful.

Janelle Williams was excited to participate in the pilot mostly because she trusted Brown.

"You know you're getting invited into something that is going to be different," said Williams, CEO of the Atlanta Wealth Building Initiative, which aims to close racial wealth gaps. "It's something that is going to tilt conventional wisdom on its head and it's something that is going to challenge your core."

She appreciated the leadership challenges and sessions analyzing real life case studies. She had been in leadership programs before but never one with only Black women who are "mission aligned."

"I love Black women. I do," Williams said. "So to be in community, firstly, with sisters who ground the space in how we show up, despite what traditional Ivy towers invite, is so refreshing. So that already set a different tone." She wished the program was longer and there were more in-person sessions, maybe even a retreat. There was so much to unpack.

Emergence of an idea

The project was years in the making. Brown and Battilana met in 2019 when Brown was a fellow at the Institute of Politics at Harvard's Kennedy School.

Battilana, a professor at Harvard's Business School and the Kennedy School, had been working on a book about power sharing and wanted to include Brown. She had been following Brown's



Janelle Williams and Barbara Perkins speak on a panel in April 2023 for a pilot program at Harvard University. Perkins said her classmates encouraged her to follow through with plans for a Black Women's Embassy, which would allow mostly Black-women led groups to showcase programs. DEBORAH BARFIELD BERRY/USA TODAY FILE

work with Black Voters Matter, a grassroots group she had cofounded. The group had been credited with helping turn out record numbers of Black voters across the South.

They vowed to work together. Then the pandemic happened. Still, they stayed in touch.

At Harvard, Brown met students determined to demand systemic changes and political and global leaders who shape policies.

She wanted other Black women to have that experience. In turn, she wanted policy makers, researchers and instructors to learn from the strength, resilience and power of Black women.

The idea emerged to create an executive education program, tapping Brown's grassroots organizing skills and Battilana's expertise running the Social Innovation + Change Initiative, a program for social change-makers from around the world. Brown, also the founder of the Truth-Speaks Innovation Foundation, had hoped to raise the \$450,000 needed for the initiative. She got a \$50,000 grant from the Libra Foundation and \$100,000 from the Highland Foundation. She said she contributed the rest.

"That's just how much I believe in us," she said.

Standing up and asking for help

One afternoon this

summer in Atlanta, Scott sported a white polo shirt with the Georgia STAND-UP logo and dashed around her organization's headquarters cheering on workers. In one room, nearly a dozen workers called Georgians urging them to check their registration. Scott bolted in.

"Who are we?" she shouted.

"Stand up!" workers answered.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"Stand up and vote!" they said.

"All right, ya'll are ready!" Scott responded. There were only a few weeks until early voting began. Scott said she was more prepared than ever to fight to protect voting rights.

Since the Harvard program ended, Scott and her classmates have had regular check-ins. There is a WhatsApp chat and talk of a retreat. One participant, Barbara Perkins,

an advocate for Black women's rights, now has an office in STAND-UP's headquarters.

The 25 participants plan to someday write a book, each with their own chapter. Meanwhile, they tap each other for their expertise, invite each other to join panels and lobby together in the nation's capital.

"That stand up! to where we were as professional social justice women in different lenses, but it also lets us know that we're stronger together," Scott said.

One thing Scott learned was to ask for more resources.

"It's not for me, it's for the work," she now reminds herself. "Now, I definitely know I'm asking everyone for resources and surprisingly they're coming."

While in Chicago this

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Leadership

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summer for the Democratic National Convention, she approached D-Nice, a nationally known and popular DJ, and asked if he would do a show in Atlanta. He said yes. She wouldn't have done that before.

"It's a certain kind of confidence and boldness that it helped to bring out," she said.

'You are so ready for this'

Each participant was carefully selected for their work in the South, Brown said. Some had toiled for years.

Too often, said Scott, requests of Black women leaders are extractive and there's isn't enough given in return. The Harvard program promised opportunity for leadership and personal growth, she said.

"It feels like, you know, people are seeing us and seeing our faces and seeing who we are," she said.

During one session, an instructor asked how they kept themselves encouraged when they moved into new spaces.

"I jump out of the plane and build the parachute on the way down," Chanceé Lundy Russell wrote in the chat.

"And I tell myself I CAN DO ALL THINGS," she added.

"I step back and pray," chipped in another.

At every session, they typed encouraging words to each other in the chat.

"You are so ready for this!"

Not everyone initially was sold on participating.

Tufaro Waller Muhammad had her

doubts about how it could help in her work as an artist and organizer for social and economic justice in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta.

"Do we really want to go to the home of the original colonizers, to get what?" she asked herself.

Throughout the program there was clapping, finger snapping and head nodding. There were also sighs, frowns and tears.

"If this isn't group therapy!" Scott said during one session.

The power of a picture

On campus for the final week, the women scrambled to take a group picture – one similar to a moment at orientation months before. Then, some students passing by had stopped and clapped.

"Wow. This is power," Battilana recalled students telling her. "It's not something that happens that often that you have a group of 25 to 30 amazingly powerful Black women from the South standing all together in the forum."

Instructors acknowledge the initiative has been like no other. While it had been tailored to relate to many Black women, sometimes they missed the mark. And in debriefings later with Brown and Lundy Russell, who had helped coordinate events, they reviewed questions that got pushback.

Unlike many Harvard students, some of these women had faced dangers, including death threats, for their work.

One session turned to struggles Black women face getting funding and the sting of anti-Black sentiments that harken to the 1960s.

"What I think was unique about this program too was the incredible level of joy and excitement and the spirituality



LaTosha Brown, founder of the Southern Black Girls and Women's Consortium, talks to a participant at a pilot program at Harvard University to help women leading programs in the South for Black women and girls. "We're building a space so these women will stay connected," she said. DEBORAH BARFIELD BERRY/USA TODAY FILE

brought to the classroom as a way to anchor the conversations – together with the level of suffering," Battilana had said.

Children of the people who could fly

At the closing dinner, there was a buzz of excitement as the soon-to-be graduates waited to get a certificate marking their completion in the leadership program.

Waller Muhammad, who by then felt the program had delivered, slowly stood up, then stretched her left arm out toward others in the room. Follow me, she instructed.

"We are the children of the people who could fly," she began to sing.

The women repeated after her.

"We are fearless. We are strong," she continued. "And we're ready to carry on."

It wasn't lost on her and others that that may have been the first time a group of Black women – loudly and unapologetically – had burst out in song in the ornate Harvard Faculty Club.

The women pranced, danced and strutted their way to the front of the room where they were handed their certificates.

"Who runs the world?" they later chanted. "Girls!"

"They're not going to let us come back," Scott said with a laugh.

Lessons for life

In Atlanta, Scott strategized with canvassers at STAND-UP's headquarters about neighborhoods to hit the next day. It was the start of early voting and a record number of Georgians had voted on an opening day.

Upstairs in her office, the certificate from the Harvard program sits atop a book shelf. She vowed to finish two more courses to earn another certificate from the business school.

Scott, who grew up across the Charles River from Harvard in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, said she was inspired during the pilot program. She and the other Black women were learning – and teaching – in that Ivy League space.

She learned that if she delegated more, if she asked for more, if she advocated for herself more, she could continue to help educate and motivate voters and pursue her dream to create more affordable housing.

"I feel like I can do this longer," Scott said of her work. "The work I've done has earned me a seat at the table."

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