

The Board of Regents unanimously chose Marguerite Ross Barnett as president of the University of Houston in 1990, making her the first Black and first female president of the institution. Barnett avoided discussion of her identity; instead, she focused on the community surrounding UH, and the development of the university as a premier research institution.

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The Legacy of MARGUERITE ROSS BARNETT: A Modern Vanguard in Education

By Megan R. Dagnall

Three decades ago, in 1990, Marguerite Ross Barnett became the first woman and first Black president of the University of Houston (UH) and of any predominantly white American research university. Her stellar reputation in academia prompted many inquiries about how it felt to be a trailblazer. Determined to be acknowledged by her competence and not her identity, on one occasion, Barnett deflected questions about her race and gender by turning to her assistant, Wendy E. Adair, and asking, “Well, how does it feel to be the first red-haired associate vice president of the university?”¹

Through her eloquent guidance and decisive leadership, Barnett consistently articulated her values of excellence at all levels by promoting diversification and partnerships, and elevating the University of Houston to a premier urban research institution. In her brief term, she significantly impacted the Houston community by establishing dynamic

programs, spearheading a successful fundraising campaign at UH, touching the lives of students and colleagues, and exemplifying a model for empowerment.

Marguerite Ross was born on May 22, 1942, to Dewey and Mary Ross in Charlottesville, Virginia. She grew up in Buffalo, New York, and graduated from Bennett High School in 1959. She entered Antioch College with the intent of becoming a scientist. However, her fascination with India’s modern political history altered her career path, and she developed a passion for political science. Receiving her bachelor’s in political science from Antioch College in 1964, she proceeded to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1972. While at the University of Chicago, she married Stephen A. Barnett, and the couple had one daughter.²

Before coming to the University of Houston, Dr. Barnett established herself as an esteemed professor. She lectured at

Marguerite Ross, shown here during her freshman year, pursued her bachelor's degree in political science at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Photo by Axel Bahnsen courtesy of *Antiochiana*, Antioch College.



the University of Chicago and subsequently taught political science at Princeton University. She chaired Howard University's Political Science Department for three years before transitioning to Columbia University. In 1980, the City of New York appointed Dr. Barnett as the professor of political science and vice-chancellor for academic affairs. From 1986 to 1990, she served as chancellor of the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), where the community regarded her so highly that when she moved to Houston, UMSL sent furniture to outfit her whole house, even though she was heading to another school.³

In 1990, during the search for a new president, the University of Houston's presidential search committee selected Dr. Barnett and two other finalists for the position. The other candidates dropped out of the hiring process, however, because they "assumed she would win," according to Joe Pratt, a member of the search committee and former Cullen Distinguished Professor of History and Business (1986-2016). With only Barnett in the running, the Board of Regents in charge of confirming the president asked the committee to provide them with multiple presidential candidates. One of the alumni representatives argued that Houston was not ready for a Black woman president. In response, Pratt and the committee members affirmed that

UH was ready to take that step forward, and that Barnett was the most qualified person for the position. In the spring of 1990, the Board of Regents unanimously voted to hire Marguerite Ross Barnett as the eighth president of the University of Houston. Pratt described her as a "double first in the whole region" as the first Black and the first woman president of UH and any other major American university that was not a historically Black college or university.⁴

Despite Dr. Barnett's extensive credentials and the overarching support from students, faculty, and alumni, not everyone was pleased with her appointment as president of the University of Houston. According to Dr. Elwyn Lee, who was vice president of student affairs at the time, some of his colleagues disapproved of a woman president, and one colleague told him in confidence that he did not want to "report to a skirt." Lee worked closely with Dr. Barnett and recalled, "I'd often think, what was the biggest concern, her being Black or her being, female? And interesting enough I think the female part was pretty big among those who had problems [with her appointment]." He added that if Barnett found out people had issues with her being a woman or a person of color, "they would not be there long."⁵

President Barnett refocused the attention from her race and gender to her achievements and goals for the school. When asked about breaking new ground during her first session with top administrators, she shifted the attention to her qualifications by saying, "I come with a background having taught at the University of Chicago, at Princeton University, at Columbia University, so I come with a background that is certainly relevant to an institution that wants to become a world class research institution ... that involves increasing our sponsored research [and] supporting scholarship on campus."⁶

President Barnett came to Houston with the vision of elevating UH to a premier urban research and teaching university. On her first day on campus, she visited the Space Vacuum Epitaxy Center and remarked, "We want to support research ... to maintain the high quality of our instructional programs and to continue our strong reputation for service to the Houston community and to the state of Texas." To fund future research, Barnett undertook a fundraising campaign that raised more than



Marguerite Ross Barnett had broad academic leadership experience and steered UH through an era of progress.

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Physicists Dr. Paul C. W. Chu and Li Gouding meet with Dr. Barnett, who was intent on raising UH's status as a premier research institution. To carry out her vision for UH, she prioritized raising and allocating funds for academics.

Photo courtesy of Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/do87375w94q.

\$150 million for the institution. Alumni John and Rebecca Moores donated \$51.4 million, which at the time was the largest grant made to an American public university. John Moores originally intended to dedicate the grant primarily to constructing new athletic buildings but increased the endowment so President Barnett could allocate funds to academics.⁷

Dr. Barnett's national academic profile brought positive attention to the University of Houston. Dr. Lee described his colleague as a strong executive who knew what she wanted to accomplish, saying, "She had high standards ... and great connections across the country." For example, one of her goals for UH was to acquire a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, representing the nation's oldest and most prestigious academic honor society. When a committee came to evaluate UH on the honor society's criteria, one of the committee members told Lee that President Barnett's respected reputation was the only reason the committee considered UH.⁸

Another one of Dr. Barnett's goals for the university was diversifying faculty to make the campus more welcoming to students of color. Shortly after her arrival, she increased the number of scholarships provided to them and added ten new faculty members of color, a 34 percent increase.⁹

During Barnett's brief yet groundbreaking term, she spearheaded significant strides in community outreach and partnerships. In an open letter to the Houston community, Barnett proclaimed that, "as

an urban institution, the pulse of the university is very much the pulse of the city." Because of Barnett's dedication to fostering cooperation in the Houston area, she enacted several programs to connect faculty, students, and the community. Barnett created the "President's Report to the Community" to highlight UH's accomplishments and stature locally and internationally. The local support Dr. Barnett enjoyed was evident when she delivered her first report to the community, an event that attracted a crowd of 800 people and an additional 200 people who were turned away due to lack of space.¹⁰

President Barnett implemented the Friends of the University of Houston to further the cordial partnership between the university and the campus community by establishing a network between them. The University Relations department printed the UH Friends publication bi-monthly to update calendar events and developments within the committee.

UH Friends included information on each college's impact on the university, community, and fields of research.¹¹

To further promote collaboration between business, education, and community leaders, Barnett established the Texas Center for University-School Partnership (TCUSP), which thirty-seven Texas institutions joined. Through the TCUSP based at UH, Texas higher education institutions took a holistic approach to bridge the gap between grade schools and universities by working closely with school districts. The partnership provided college tutors to students who failed state-required tests and went beyond the classroom by giving back to the community.¹²

Similarly, President Barnett enacted the Bridge Program, that encouraged high school students to increase their science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) abilities by completing four years of math and science in high school



Marguerite Ross Barnett had a close working relationship with the vice president of student affairs, Dr. Elwyn Lee. He vividly remembers her brief tenure and the respect that she garnered at the university and in the Houston community.

Photo courtesy of Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/dog95569585w.

and participating in activities at the University of Houston, NASA, and local industries.¹³

Barnett also understood the need to protect Houston communities' quality of life in other aspects. At the 1990 Autumn Convocation she stated, "Houston is especially vulnerable to environmental problems due to our strong programs for research, energy, and chemical engineering. We need to develop equally strong programs in environmental assessment." The Texas Center for Environmental Studies she established used leadership from history, law, engineering, and political science to emphasize the importance of environmental issues.¹⁴

In addition to Barnett's administrative feats, she is the author of over forty articles and the editor or author of five books. In 1981, Barnett's book titled *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* won the American Political Science Association's award for the best work on ethnic and cultural pluralism. Barnett received numerous other awards throughout her academic career, including the Bethune-Tubman-Truth Woman of the Year Award in 1983 and the Association of Black Women in Higher Education Award for Educational Excellence in 1986.¹⁵

Barnett's presence at the University of Houston reached beyond her professional achievements by personally impacting students and faculty. Dr. Lee recalled his admiration for Barnett, saying, "This wasn't her first rodeo."¹⁶ He described her as organized, businesslike, and focused; he also emphasized that Dr. Barnett supported women on campus and deeply cared about the students.

Unfortunately, health complications cut short President Barnett's time at the university. She first informed the public of a neuroendocrinological illness in a letter to the UH community in November 1991. Barnett was a private person who did not elaborate on her illness, and after her condition worsened,



President Barnett delivered powerful remarks in her convocation and commencement addresses, inspiring students and outlining her goals to bolster the reputation and wellbeing of UH and the Houston community.

Photo courtesy of Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/do87719p01n.

when someone who's done great things in a short time and has awesome potential is suddenly taken from you." Pratt shared similar sentiments about Barnett's tragic passing, saying, "She was a person who was going to end up running Stanford or Harvard or something someday."¹⁸

To commemorate her accomplishments and contributions to the institution, the College of Social Science (now the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences or CLASS) embedded a bronze plaque on a stone in the flowerbed

near Charles F. McElhinney Hall. Additionally, the African American Studies program created an annual endowment in her name.¹⁹

Marguerite Ross Barnett's daughter, Amy DuBois Barnett, spoke at the University of Houston's 45th African American Studies Annual Scholarship Banquet, which paid tribute to Dr. Barnett. In addition to Amy's success in digital media, she followed in her mother's footsteps by teaching as an adjunct professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Amy shared lessons from her mother, saying, "She showed me



President Barnett proudly displays her Cougar spirit with the University of Houston's mascot, Shasta.

Photo courtesy of Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries, ark:/84475/d063827c390.



The marker honoring President Marguerite Ross Barnett is located in the quadrangle outside Farish, Heyne, and McElhinney Halls on the UH campus. Photo courtesy of Dr. Monica Perales.

true competency, how to discover who I really am and how to be who I am, how to achieve at a high level, and how to live my own life and be happy.” Amy revealed the difficulty of losing her mother and how her memory inspires her to benefit others.²⁰

Beyond Houston, people around the country mourned Barnett’s death. UMSL held a ceremony in her honor and later dedicated Chancellor Marguerite Ross Barnett Plaza.²¹ Barnett’s family also held a private service in Scottsville, Virginia.

Dr. Barnett’s success as a top administrator served as a role model of strong female leadership, especially to women of color, by paving the way for women in higher education. As Lee noted, “She was a trailblazer here, and like most trailblazers, you have to overcome challenges that other folks won’t have in the future because you overcame them as being the first Black president, as being the first female president.”²²



Dr. Barnett visits with Dr. James Pickering and Dr. Elwyn Lee in the African American Studies office. Lee keeps this photo in his office and likes to ask students that stop by if they know who Dr. Barnett is before explaining her legacy.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Elwyn Lee.

Comparison can be drawn between Dr. Barnett and Dr. Renu Khator, who became the chancellor of the University of Houston System and president of the University of Houston in 2008. Only the second woman to serve as UH president, she is the first female chancellor in the state of Texas and the first Indian immigrant to lead a comprehensive U.S. research university. Lee pointed out that Barnett and Khator share many similarities, “They both came to the university at about the same age, they both have doctorates in political science, they both did their major research and writing about India, and they both created a buzz when they got here.” Similar to Barnett, Khator prioritizes research innovation, diversification, and support of the Houston community. Under her leadership, UH achieved Tier One status in 2011 and a Phi Beta Kappa chapter in 2016, along with subsequent honors.²³

Dr. Marguerite Ross Barnett is remembered as a woman of achievement with an impressive academic track record



Dr. Barnett talks with (left to right) Lois Stark, Carey C. Shuart, and Patsy Cravens. Dr. Barnett’s term as university president was characterized by initiative, leadership, and outreach with widespread support from students, faculty, and alumni.

Photo courtesy of Cynthia Macdonald Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, 2010-019.

that culminated in her emergence as president of the University of Houston. She not only broke the glass ceiling at UH but was also widely acknowledged for her positive service to the university and the community at large. Barnett’s legacy resides in the programs she established, the people she touched, and the female leaders she empowered. Looking to the future at Autumn Convocation in 1990, she challenged her audience, saying, “We can either be bystanders to a passing twenty-first century historical drama of heroic proportions, or we can be leaders.”²⁴ **HH**

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