To Whom Much is Given: A Study of Black Female Leadership Within the Context of Spouses of Historically Black College and University Presidents

By

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**TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN: A STUDY OF BLACK FEMALE LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF SPOUSES OF HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS**

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Addie Scott Baker, who exposed me and my brothers Scott C. and Stephen C. - “SCB3” - to the beauty and complexity of language, the joy and satisfaction of curiosity, and the preservative power of unconditional love; and to our next generation, Kevin, Kendel, and Evan, give yourselves permission to ask good questions, relentlessly pursue truth, stand in your God given power, laugh out loud at least once a day, and do your part to make the world just a little bit better while you’re here.
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“You get the glory from this,
You get the glory from this,
No matter what I have to go through in this world,
As long as You get the glory from it”.

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ABSTRACT

Black women have engaged in the uplift of the Black race, community and family since the Atlantic Slave Trade forced their arrival on the Eastern shores of the United States. This research project explored and recorded the uplift efforts of Black First Ladies who are married to presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) and use platforms that they did not actively seek to engage in the uplift of others. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences that contributed to these Black First Ladies’ involvement in racial and community uplift, and to identify strategies and practices these unique community leaders employ when engaging in uplift. The stories of Black First Ladies have been absent in the academic canon and are worthy of exploration. The data for this project was collected using the Three Interview Series. The three study participants were interviewed three times on three separate occasions for between 45 to 90 minutes each. To ensure safety, during the height of the Covid 19 pandemic, each interview was conducted virtually using the Zoom platform.

Experiences that contributed to racial and community uplift discussed in this project include the internalization of messages communicated in the homes of study participants during their childhoods, encounters with adults in K-12 schooling, pivotal moments in higher education, and occurrences in professional settings. Strategies and practices employed by participants as they engage in uplift include discussed include conflict resolution, connecting and advocacy. Other themes include, having a strong sense of self, mediation, the ability to “see” oneself and others, acts of service, placing one’s family first, and creating legacy. The findings indicate a need for professional learning for K-12 educators that targets identifying and nurturing leadership dispositions during this critical period of identity development.
CHAPTER I

Background and Rationale of the Proposed Study

The bid for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination occurred during a period in American history when emotions were soaring. Uprisings and unrest across the globe—and particularly in the United States—in response to the murders of Black citizens at the hands of White police officers amid the global Coronavirus 2019 pandemic heightened the sensitivities of candidates vying to lead our nation. Numerous issues (e.g., racism, climate change, education, LGBTQIA rights, affordable health care) inhabited the core of each candidate’s platform. Each candidate’s unique perspective and intense passion revealed what they held as the most pressing political matters of our time. Despite differing priorities, all Democratic candidates, including the then-candidate, now-President, Joe Biden, shared the belief that Black women possess tremendous societal influence. Now-Vice President, then-Senator, Kamala Harris, repeatedly referenced Black women as the overlooked backbone of the Democratic party. In a 2019 New York Times article that explored the national demands on Black women in politics, authors Lisa Lerer and Jennifer Medina credit Black women with being the most powerful Democrats and note the unique position and political strength held by African American women (Lerer & Medina, 2019). Scholars also document the historical struggle of Black women for social transformation and note that Black women have served as activists for the survival and wholeness of the Black community for generations (Henry, 2005). From home to the board room, from enslavement to emancipation, and from voting rights to civil rights, Black Lives Matter to #Me Too, Black women blaze the trail toward national transformation. This study extends/...etc.
Throughout generations of enslavement in the U.S., Black women found themselves in a position unique to any other group (Grant, 1989). Society expected them to perform and produce at the level of Black males without any of the protections enjoyed by White women. Slave masters demanded that Black women provide an equal measure of work and endure an equal measure punishment to that of their Black male counterparts, and this is well documented (Omolade, 1994). Omolade (1994) offers that, in addition to this burden, was the expectation of Black women to bear and care for children. Gilkes (1985) suggests that the capacity of Black women to fulfill these inconceivable expectations led to a still-present disregard for the need to protect their virtue as women while maintaining the demand that they continue to perpetuate the culture and preserve the traditions of their community, in ways, “mothering” others. Other scholars support this claim (Edwards, 2000; Payne 1989; Reagon, 1990).

Edwards (2000) attributes the notion of “mothering” to a unique station that Black women have occupied in history. According to Edwards (2000), the role Black women have historically played in society is deeply rooted in this concept. Camille Wilson Cooper (2007) explains the part that “motherwork” plays in African American women’s lives. Motherwork, according to Cooper, is an act of cultural resistance and empowerment, deeply rooted in care and justice-seeking for the Black community (Cooper, 2007). As shared by Gilkes (1985), Collins (2006) draws attention to "the power of Black motherhood," which has historically been unlike traditional models of motherhood. Throughout history, the expectation for Black women was that they possess the ability to care for the children of others while simultaneously ensuring the success of their own children. Cooper and McCoy (2007) describe Black maternal figures (e.g., biological mothers, grandmothers, fictive kin mothers) as more than just the bearers and nurturers of children but as those responsible for nurturing the culture, faith, and resiliency of the
Black community. Specifically, Hale (1980) refers to Black women as mediators, adept at navigating between the white culture's oppression and the perpetuation of the Black value-structure. Gilkes notes, for example, that many Black women involved in political activism report becoming activists because of their advocacy for the children in their respective communities (Gilkes, 1985). Over time, Black women in the Black church and community-at-large were often given the title "mother" because of their wisdom, skill, and commitment to meet the needs of their communities and the needs of the Black race (Edwards, 2000).

This mother-like commitment from Black women is well documented in academia. Reagon (1990) attributes the power and influence of Black community mothers to three critical notions: 1) The keen awareness of the impact of family on the way society operates, 2) The enduring presence of Black female leadership in the Black community, and 3) The ability of Black women to navigate between the worlds of men and women. Clark-Hine (1986), for example, attributes the notion of mothering to Black women’s role in the enduring battle for freedom in the U.S. (e.g., emancipation, anti-lynching, education, suffrage). Through each arduous period in Black people’s battle for liberation, Black women have served to fortify the Black community with the qualities (e.g., time, unconditional love, physical/emotional energy, comfort, economic burden bearing) that Balaji et. al., (2007, p. 1388) as shared by Luthar, et. al.,(2015) attribute to motherhood.

African American women’s desire to uplift their communities likely has additional linkages to African cultural themes centered around Black women. Studies support the existence of multiple cultural themes that permeate the African American community, and present steadfastly among African American women, and are rooted in enduring customs that have their origins in African life. One of these themes, foundational to this proposed study, is
Communalism, the awareness of people’s interdependence (Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement, 1999). African culture is deep-rooted in Communalism. Indigenous Africans have historically expressed moral and cultural values based on relationships (e.g., blood relations, community members, tribespeople) within a socio-cultural setting (Etta, et al., 2016). Gilkes’ (1983) notion of Black motherhood, coupled with the African cultural theme of Communalism, connects closely with James' definition of "other mothering." James (1993) references West African traditions of communal living when he posits that othermothering requires a formal or informal acceptance of responsibility for a child that is not one's own. According to James (1993), the conditions of enslavement forced an adaptation of the African practice of Communalism in two significant ways: 1) enslaved women were required to care for the children of their masters, and 2) enslaved women often became the caretakers of children in their communities after enslavers sold the children’s parents. Historically, it has been the Black woman's role to ensure her community’s success and well-being. As it relates to this proposed study, the Black women in focus have taken responsibility, some formally and others informally, for the lives and well-being of the members of their immediate and extended communities for generations. This proposed study asserts that there may be a secure connection between African Communalism and African American women’s desire to uplift their communities.
Problem Statement

There is a shortage in the academic literature around the lived experiences of Black women married to HBCU presidents. Scholars of Black feminism have entertained the "invisibility" of Black women for a very long time (hooks, 1981). This notion of being figuratively invisible is a mechanism for explaining these community actors’ missing narratives in the education space. In a 2009 study, Sesko and Biernat explored the invisibility of Black women. They sought to understand whether Black women are more likely to be "invisible" than White women, Black men, or White men. The authors worked from the premise that Black women are neither prototypical of Blacks nor women. Sesko and Biernat discovered that the non-prototypicality of Black women's race and gender often results in them becoming invisible. Research suggests that the complex identities of Black women cause them to experience "intersectional invisibility" (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). According to Sesko and Beirnat (2009), Black women often go unnoticed, and their statements go unheard.

Research on Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) chronicles attempts to reward presidents' wives for the work they do on their campuses and in their communities. Efforts for remuneration include providing compensation, administering contracts, and bestowing official titles (McNaughten & McNaughten, 2018). The Council of Independent Colleges' Presidents Institute reports that 23% of their members' spouses receive some level of tangible compensation (e.g., modest salaries, lighter professorial teaching loads, stipends) for their campus-related efforts (Cotton, 2003). While there is research that explores how the wives of PWI presidents are recognized and compensated for the leadership efforts, information in the field does not support that HBCU presidents’ wives receive significant tangible compensation for work done on behalf of their institutions. Anecdotal research conducted by the Vice President for Academic Programs
at the Council of Independent Colleges’ Presidents Institute substantiates that institutions do not compensate the vast majority of HBCU presidents’ spouses for their efforts (K. Pannell, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

The academic literature demonstrates the crucial role of HBCUs in American society and documents the need for these institutions and the divergent leaders on their campuses. Allen, as reported by Davis (2015) suggests that HBCU’s provide students with both a quality education and a refuge for their holistic (economic, social, political) development (Allen, et.al., 2007). HBCU’s are credited with educating 70% of all Black doctors and dentists, 50% of all Black engineers and public school teachers, and 35% of all Black attorneys (Avery, 2009, p. 328). These essential institutions are staunch promoters of African American social mobility (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Among the multitude of leaders influencing the campus and community quality of life at HBCU’s are Black women. One particular subset of Black women who take responsibility for uplifting the communities where they live and work are those who have been "given" positions of leadership, because they were married to presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Known as "First Ladies" in the Black community, these women invest a substantial amount of time, talent, and resources in the institutions where their spouses administer. The community-centered contributions of these spouses of professional community leaders and others (e.g., elected officials, university presidents, pastors), especially in the Black Community, have been overlooked and understudied. Over the last several decades, the presidential spouse’s role has been the topic of frequent discussion. The attention paid to these university actors focuses on spouses’ experiences at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) (Horner & Williams, 2013).
Research on the Black experience in America documents the critical need for cultural legacy and links a lack of cultural legacy and racial identity to race-related stress (Johnson & Arbona, 2006). There is minimal research on the important leadership contributions that the spouses of Black professional community leaders make, how they enact leadership, and why they choose to engage in community uplift—and how this creates cultural legacy.

Research substantiates that Black women have always engaged in uplift and social justice work and proves that the efforts of Black women have been acutely overlooked, ignored, and made invisible (hooks, 1981). Studies conducted over several decades examine presidents’ wives’ roles and duties at Predominately White Institutions (Cotton, 2003) but no research on the wives of HBCU presidents. Through this research, I identified a considerable number of HBCU presidents’ wives, commonly referred to as “First Ladies,” who invest a substantial amount of time, talent, and resources in the institutions where their husbands preside. A general shortage of information exists in the education space about HBCU presidents' wives’ lived experiences. A recent investigation of relevant literature has exposed an absence of research devoted to HBCU presidents’ wives who use the platforms afforded to them by marriage to uplift others. This study aimed to understand and document the lived experiences of Black women married to presidents of HBCUs who choose to use the leadership platforms bestowed upon them by marriage to edify, empower and educate their fellow community members. In addition, in the act of recording the lived experiences of this unique group of leaders, this study hopes to contribute to the shared cultural legacy of Black women leaders.
Research Questions

As stated earlier, since their inception, HBCUs have served as cultural repositories, engines of social change, and sanctuaries for the enrichment, edification, and elevation of the Black race (Jean-Marie, 2006). Historically Black Colleges and Universities cradle Black culture and appreciate and sustain the Black experience as part of their mission (Jean-Marie, 2006). HBCUs are centers for social and political development. These institutions persist as bastions of educational excellence and cultural archives for the Black community (Jean-Marie, 2006). This study’s overarching research question is: What are the shared experiences of Black First Ladies that inform why they choose to use platforms they did not actively seek to engage in others’ uplift? The following sub-questions expand the exploration:

1. What experiences have contributed to the involvement of these women in racial and community uplift?

2. What strategies and practices do these women employ when engaging in racial and community uplift?

Overview of Conceptual Framework

The dynamics of power, resistance, and care that contribute to African American women inserting themselves into their communities to strengthen them conjure the metaphor of a mosaic. A study of this complexity can benefit from a blended theoretical analysis. Through a blended theoretical approach that uses Black Feminist Epistemology, and relevant tenets of Critical Race Theory, this study sought to 1) illuminate multiple factors that prompt Black women to devote time, energy, and resources to fortifying others, 2) expose the oppressive factors that compel Black women to do so, and 3) amplify the voices of this unique group of Black women whose stories are absent in the literature.
Black Feminist Epistemology incorporates relevant tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Briefly, Black Feminist Thought is a field of knowledge focused on the points of view and experiences of Black women that centers Black Women’s ideas and experiences, keeping them at the core of inquiry (Collins, 2015). This framework considers the intersectional nature of Black women’s experiences and serves to adequately understand their journeys. Black Feminist Thought’s comprehensive nature allows me to center the shared complexities of Black First Ladies’ lived experiences. CRT is a field of knowledge that seeks to understand how racism in America has shaped legal structures and public and policy (Yosso & Solorzano, 2007). The two specific tenets of CRT that supported this study are intersectionality and storytelling, which I explain in detail later. By applying Black Feminist Thought and concepts from CRT, this theoretical analysis approach provides sufficient conceptual grounding to promote a thorough understanding of each HBCU First Lady’s unique journey. The theoretical framework section in Chapter 2 of this study includes a more robust explanation of this approach. I also offer definitions of key terms and concepts that provide context for examining this widely ignored group’s lived experiences.

**Research Design Overview**

Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) methods supported the exploration of the lived experiences of study participants. Data collection included interviewing three Black female First Ladies virtually, three times, with each interview lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. This method, known as the Three Interview Series (Seidman, 2000), provided a rich data set from which to glean knowledge about how and in what ways these leaders-adjacent use their platforms to uplift others. Study data was analyzed and coded using an approach that combined Jossellson’s (2001) four suggested coding steps, and the three analytical coding tools
that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) put forth as a pathway to understanding the lives of study participants. The coded data was used to identify themes that informed an understanding of the experiences of Black First Ladies who insert themselves in the uplift of others, and the strategies they employed to uplift. I describe the findings in detail in Chapter Four.

**Description of Key Concepts and Variables**

Revered linguist and respected scholar James Gee (2013) explains that humans use languages to convey information, scaffold how actions are performed, and entice others to take particular perspectives on experiences. Gee posits that our understandings of words, phrases, and sentences are always "situated," meaning that we customize language to our actual contexts. With Gee's research in mind, it becomes essential to situate specific key terms and concepts in this document within the context of this proposed study. The following terms provide readers of this study with the contextual frame of reference used to interpret the research and better understand the lived experiences of the study’s participants:

- **Leaders Adjacent** are major community actors who did not actively seek top leadership positions but use the platforms provided by their spouses’ positions to assume and actualize leadership roles in their communities.
- **Blacks** and **African Americans**, used as synonymous terms, are people in America of African descent.
- **Historically Black College and University** (HBCU) is an institution of higher education “whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans” (Zamani-Gallaher, 2010)
- **Cultural Legacy** represents traditions handed down by ancestors from the cultures we belong to, shaping achievement patterns.
- **Racial Uplift** is the idea that educated Blacks are responsible for the majority of the race’s welfare.

- **Invisibility** is the absence of or erroneous representations of oppressed groups or individuals (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008), evidenced by a lack of individuation or lack of differentiation between group members.

This study examined the lived experiences of Black women who are leaders in their respective communities. Understanding how Black women have historically led and uplifted their communities provides a more refined lens through which to understand participants’ lives and the contributions of this marginalized group to society.

**Significance of Study**

This study represents an opportunity to contribute to the academic discourse around HBCU leadership. The first-person recounting of HBCU First Ladies’ narratives, whose ability to catech on behalf of the institutions and communities they represent, is worthy of exploration and documentation. There is a significant deficit in the education field surrounding the contributions of presidential spouses at HBCUs. This dissertation specifically sought to understand the personal journeys and lived experiences of three presidential spouses, traditionally called "First Ladies," who use their positions to uplift the communities where their spouses preside. Narrative Inquiry methods supported exploring the unique experiences of the leaders adjacent at the center of this study. A narrative inquiry design allowed me to hear from the participants in their own words. The study participants are three Black women who use the leadership platforms bestowed upon them to uplift their community stakeholders.

This aggregate of stories provided insight into each subject’s unique contributions, advance an understanding of these women’s diverse approaches to campus/community
involvement, and lay the groundwork for this group’s future studies. Exploring the participants’ myriad background experiences illuminated the shared nature of individuals who demonstrate high levels of investment in uplifting others. Findings demonstrated that experiences in early development, at home, played a significant role in why these Black First Ladies engaged in racial and community uplift. Finding also that revealed several strategies and practices these community leaders use to uplift. Each woman was able to use skills and dispositions acquired across the course of her lifetime (e.g., early schooling, college, early professional and career) to uplift those in her community and on the campuses where her husband presides. In addition, the findings indicate a need to professional learning that targets K-12 educators and supports them in identifying and nurturing the potential of young Black girls at an early stage in their development.

**Organization of Dissertation**

This chapter has served as an introduction to this study. In Chapter Two, I discuss in greater detail the literature on HBCUs, female leadership and specifically Black female leadership, and the paucity of literature on HBCU presidents’ wives. In Chapter Three, I discuss the research design and methods used to conduct the research, as well as ethical considerations, positionality, and study limitations. Chapter Four delineates findings from the study. Finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss my findings and their implications for our understanding of the lived experiences of Black women married to presidents of HBCUs, who choose to use the leadership platforms bestowed upon by marriage, to edify, empower and educate their fellow community members.
CHAPTER II: Literature Review

This purpose of this dissertation study was to explore and record the uplift efforts of Black First Ladies who are married to presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) who use platforms that they did not actively seek to engage in the uplift of others. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences that contributed to these Black First Ladies’ involvement in racial and community uplift, and to identify strategies and practices these unique community leaders employ when engaging in uplift. This analysis is an aggregation of literature that has a broad bearing on my dissertation. It is a survey of the associated literature culled in attempt to inform the manifold context in which this study takes place. This review includes the historical context of HBCUs, information surrounding the purpose of HBCUs, as well as HBCU demographics and traditional leadership. This review of literature also informs what the scholarly discourse has to say about leadership styles, female leadership and specifically the leadership of Black women. In addition, this analysis of the literature draw attention to the paucity in the scholarly canon related to the involvement of presidential spouses on HBCU campuses.

HBCUs

Historical Context

In this section, I provide some historical context for how and why HBCUs came to be established. In Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, one of the most significant slave revolts in American history occurred. Nat Turner, a 31-year-old slave, led a band of seven enslaved men in a battle for freedom. The rebellion lasted slightly over 24 hours and resulted in the deaths of approximately 60 White Virginians. The retaliation which followed the unrest resulted in the execution of hundreds of slaves and the development of legislation that would impact the lives of
enslaved Africans and their descendants for decades to come. Whites across the country’s southern region believed that Nat Turner's revolt resulted from his education. Turner learned to read the Bible at a young age and quickly developed a keen ability to read and interpret scripture (Anderson, 2010). Unable to reconcile the contradiction between the scriptures’ liberating messages and the savage inhumanity of enslavement, Turner organized a fight for freedom (Greenberg, 2004). Virginia lawmakers and a group of fellow southern states responded by developing policies that deemed Black people’s education illegal (PBS, n.d.). Lawmakers feared that educated slaves would pursue liberation (e.g., incite further revolts, forge freedom papers). These policies endured well into the twentieth century (Rury, 2016).

Spring (2004) documents that the early years of American schooling provided minimal and often non-existent formal learning opportunities for Black people. Spring (2004) emphasizes that early American schools were conveyors of messages of Whites’ superiority and the inferiority of Blacks (Spring, 2013). However, this period of tension, oppression, and disdain primed the education landscape to establish the Historically Black College and University.

**Purpose of HBCUs**

In a 1935 journal article, *Does the Negro Need Separate Schools*, Dr. William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) DuBois, one of the nation’s most influential scholars and social critics (Dubois, et al., 1987), asserts the critical need for HBCU’s existence (Dubois, 1935). Dubois explains that Black students experience more significant success in institutions that are designed specifically for them. In a discussion of mainstream society’s attitudes during that period in history, Dubois notes the mainstream’s disdain for Black Americans. He presupposes that Black students need instructors who possess a sympathetic disposition toward their lived experiences, in-depth knowledge of academic content and a commitment to social equity. According to
Dubois, these characteristics are critical if the expectation is that Black students receive an adequate education (Jones, 2014). According to Dubois, without instructors’ requisite sympathy and knowledge, Black students would lack two things: 1) the ability to defend against the growing hatred of Whites and 2) the natural increase in their quality of life. Research on HBCUs’ vital role in the higher education landscape supports and expounds upon Dubois’ conclusions.


Black Colleges played a critical role in cultivating Black leaders and scholars during a period in our nation when Black people were legally forbidden to learn formally and risked merciless punishment for doing so. Mobley (2017) posits that HBCUs have traditionally served not only as engines of social change but as places of refuge for Black scholars; HBCUs are a vital component of the U.S. education landscape. These specialized institutions played and continue to play a critical role in equipping Black students to recognize, successfully navigate, and combat discrimination based on race.
In a discussion of HBCUs’ purpose and relevance, Mobley (2017) documents the role that these institutions have traditionally played in American society. HBCUs have perpetually served as cultural repositories, engines of social change, and sources of racial uplift. HBCUs are among the few places where Black culture resides at the forefront of the institutions’ existence and where the African American experience is appreciated and strategically sustained. Jean-Marie asserts that HBCUs remain centers for social and political development. These institutions persist as bastions of educational excellence and cultural archives for the Black community (Jean-Marie, 2006). Scholar Sydney Freeman, Jr. has done extensive research on HBCUs and HBCU leadership. Freeman and Gasman (2014), in their analysis of HBCU presidents’ characteristics, also note HBCUs’ longstanding responsibility to create and cultivate the Black middle class in the United States. These scholars also report that HBCUs are chiefly responsible for producing Black talent in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Freeman & Gasman, 2014).

Research supports that racism prompted the need for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Evans, etc. 2002). Before HBCUs’ existence, higher education institutions legally denied Black Americans access to formalized higher education (Rury, 2016). Historical accounts credit a diverse group of contributors (e.g., White philanthropists, abolitionists, former slaves) with developing HBCUs in the United States. The federal government’s Freedmen’s Bureau contributed significantly to the development of many U.S. HBCUs (Gasman, 2013). White philanthropists established the first HBCUs before the Civil War. In the 2013 report, *The Changing Face of Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, Gasman reveals that Cheney University and Wilberforce University, founded in 1837 and 1856 respectively, shared the same mission as the institutions that followed them: to educate Black citizens. These early HBCUs
provided a primarily religious education coupled with limited elemental skills training for young Blacks (Redd, 1998).

Most of these early HBCUs were founded in southern states to provide education for newly freed slaves (Redd, 1998). In the years immediately following the Civil War, newly freed slaves pursued higher education in significant numbers (Redd, 1998). A diverse group of stakeholders at the federal level (e.g., Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands), black churches, and White benefactors engaged in establishing higher learning institutions. Each HBCU has a unique founding story, and all HBCUs share the critical distinction of being the only institutions of higher learning to accept Black citizens until the 1960s. The number of HBCUs expanded in the decades immediately following the Civil War. Between 1866 and 1964, more than 100 of the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established (Redd, 1998).

The history of education in America documents several critical legislative decisions that influenced Historically Black Colleges and Universities’ continued development over time. Perhaps the most relevant legislation to HBCUs’ effect and existence are the First and Second Morrill Acts and the Supreme Court decisions, *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education*. The decades that followed the Civil War brought a rapid increase in the number of HBCUs in the United States. Before the Civil War, these institutions’ primary funding sources were localized entities (e.g., communities, churches, private donations, missionaries, humanitarian organizations) (Brown 2013). After the Civil War, scholars document a heightened focus on the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution to legislate funding for these specialized institutions (Brown, 2013). Language in each of these Amendments mentions Southern states’ legal requirement to provide free public education for
former slaves and free Blacks. This heightened focus on mandating access to education for all citizens catalyzed a shift in HBCUs’ funding sources, from local entities to state governments.

The Morrill Act of 1862, also called the Land Grant College Act of 1962, afforded federal funds for state education in agriculture, mechanic arts, and education (Brown, 2013). This act provided each state with 30,000 acres of public land and became the foundation for our national system of state colleges and universities. Before the Morrill Act, higher learning institutions excluded society members working in jobs providing low pay, requiring limited skill, or demanding physical labor. The Morrill Act opened opportunities for the working-class to pursue academic degrees (Morrill Act 1862, n.d.). The Morrill Act intended to provide affordable and accessible education for lower, and middle-class citizens. Before this legislation, the higher education system exclusively served the citizenry’s upper class to pursue professional degrees. Excessive tuition rates and rigorous admission requirements made higher education elusive and unrealistic for lower-class citizens (e.g., laborers, farmers) in the United States (Wade, 2005).

The Morrill Act of 1890 stipulated additional public support for higher education. The 1890 act was more specific and mandated that any federal government funds extended to the states go to schools that enrolled Black students (Morrill, n.d.). The profoundly ingrained segregationist culture in the American South prompted the development of separate public institutions for Blacks and Whites. Segregated institutions enabled Southern states to adhere to the 1890 mandate, which allocated federal funds only to those institutions educating Black students while simultaneously making it possible to maintain their fundamental commitment to separating the races (Brown, 2013). Brown (2013) addresses the institutions created in response to The Second Morrill Act as "1890 schools". Historians document the Morrill Act of 1890 as
the legislation that solidified the central system of segregation in the United States’ southern region and initiated separate and unequal higher education (Brown 2013). A 1994 U.S. Department of Education report identifies social mores, pseudo-science, and the law as playing a significant role in reinforcing unequal schooling for Black children. The report explains how historical and institutionalized racism in the 20th century allowed bigotry to rise to a place of societal respectability (US DOE, 1994). Respected scholars convinced lawmakers that “overage, defective, delinquent, or the Negro Race” needed to be isolated from the general population (Sherer & Morhaz, 1979). Racist academic endorsements like these prompted the U.S. Constitution’s framers to sanction Blacks’ separate and unequal treatment. Pseudo-scientific articles further expounded on the ineducability of Black people. This disinformation justified providing inadequate school facilities, insufficient classroom supplies, mediocre teacher salaries, and the teaching of simple skills and values designed to keep Black students from aspiring to “the White man’s condition” (US DOE, 1994). The Black community’s perpetual reliance on shared goals, congruent expectations, and mutual respect fortified their ability to counter the oppressive structures, institutionalized racism, and suppression of Black scholarship woven into the United States’ fabric since its framing. For example, Walker (1992) documents Black parents and teachers using the little they had to provide an education for Black children that instilled self-esteem, societal responsibility, and academic excellence (Walker, 1992). The narrative surrounding the resilience of the Black community is incomplete without an acknowledgment of the perpetual struggle for civil rights, human rights, and equality (Allen, 2020).

The landmark case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1892) is one of the most widely cited Supreme Court cases in the scholarly discussion of segregation and policy. *Plessy v. Ferguson*
demonstrates Black resistance to segregation and the weaponization of law to rationalize the practice of inequality. The Louisiana Separate Car Act, which mandated that Blacks and Whites occupy separate cars while traveling on the public railways, catalyzed *Plessy V. Ferguson*. The case revolved around Homer Plessy, a 30-year-old, Black shoemaker who purchased a first-class train ticket and strategically sat in a passenger car designated for White passengers only. When asked by the conductor to leave the car, Plessy refused and was immediately removed from the train and jailed. Citing a violation of his rights, Plessy appeared before Judge Howard Ferguson in Louisiana Criminal Court. Ferguson found Plessy guilty. In 1896, Plessy’s case appeared before the Supreme Court, where Justice William Billings Brown also decided against Plessy. Judge Brown’s ruling favored segregation as long as public facilities for each race were equal (PBS, 2013). The *Plessy* decision infused the language “separate but equal” into the U.S. Constitution. This pivotal ruling paved the way for a series of decisions that expanded the reach of racially segregated practices in public spaces (e.g., buses, trains, restrooms, schools), known as the Jim Crow Laws (Wishon, 2004).

Over half a century after the *Plessy* decision, the Supreme Court delivered a ruling in the landmark case, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954), and declared “separate but equal” facilities unconstitutional (Stories, 1994). Grounded in the *Brown v. Board* decision, doors began to open for Black students’ admittance to colleges and universities that were historically accessible only to White students. With the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s came the move toward integration for many higher education institutions that, until that point, served exclusively White student bodies. The University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education (Penn-GSE) documents the connection between the national drive toward integration and,
paradoxically, a significant drop in enrollment at HBCUs (Gasman, 2013). Currently, there are 105 HBCUs in the United States (NCES, 2017).

**HBCU Demographics**

Literature typically depicts HBCUs as if they operate in what Gasman and Bowman III (2011) refer to as a “bubble”; they are perceived to be generally homologous (Gasman and Bowman III, 2011). On the contrary, these institutions, much like all of higher education, are varied in size, scope, and specialty (e.g., public, private, sectarian, non-sectarian urban, rural, financially solvent, financially unstable) (Gasman, 2013). However, enrollment numbers for Historically Black Colleges and Universities have fluctuated consistently. Before the *Brown v. Board* ruling, HBCUs were responsible for educating nearly the entire Black middle class. Today’s 105 existing HBCUs enroll 11% of Black students in the country (Gasman, 2013) and represent less than 3% of the colleges and universities in the United States. Nichols reports a 26% increase in HBCU enrollment between 1983 and 2001 (Nichols, 2003).

According to the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (2011) not only has there been a shift in HBCU enrollment, but HBCU student demographics have also shifted. In the 1950s, almost 100% of the students enrolled in U.S. HBCUs were Black. In 1980, Black students comprised 80% of the total HBCU student population. Currently, 76% of the HBCU student population is Black, 13% is White, 3% is Latinx, 1% is Asian/Pacific Islander, and the remaining 7% represents a combination of students of two or more races, and students categorized as "nonresident Alien" (Gasman, 2013). A 2011 report from the National Center for Education Statistics reports a lack of gender parity among American HBCUs. Black undergraduate female enrollment is higher than male enrollment at most HBCUs and exceeds male enrollment at a slightly higher rate than the national average (USDOE, 2011).
Leadership and Leadership at HBCUs

In the pursuit of a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Black women leaders who play a central role in weaving the fabric that holds HBCUs together, the notion of leadership must be examined and defined within the context of this study. An explosion of scholarly work in the 1980s emerged around leadership's nature (Northouse, 2016). This burst resulted in a wave of academic definitions and numerous “themes” related to defining leadership (Northouse, 2016). When it comes to explaining the meaning of leadership, Northouse suggests that people often intuitively know what leadership looks like and feels like; however, both leaders and followers struggle to capture a definition of leadership that all can accept (Northhouse 2016). Offering that disclaimer, Northouse (2016) defines leadership as a process through which one individual influences a group to achieve a common goal.

Kotter (2009) draws attention to the difference between leadership and management when he suggests that most U.S. corporations are over-managed and under-led. Management and leadership are two complementary systems of action that require a balanced application (Kotter, 2009). Kotter posits that an organization cannot function effectively without both approaches. It is the challenge of leaders to determine which style (leadership or management) is necessary for any given situation.

Organizational management is a well-known set of processes that help organizations do what they know how to do well (Kotter 2017). Management is rooted in actions and facilitates the work at hand. According to Kotter, leadership is grounded in behavior and enables how the task at hand is done (Kotter, 2017). Kotter uses a wartime metaphor to solidify the difference between management and leadership when he suggests that during wartime, superiors cannot manage soldiers into battle; they must lead them. (Kotter, 2017). According to Kotter,
organizations committed to leading should develop leadership potential from within, strengthening the capacity to lead effectively on a large scale (Kotter, 2009).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have a proven track record of nurturing and producing Black leaders by cultivating talent from within (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). As noted earlier, HBCUs’ have a longstanding responsibility to create and cultivate the Black middle class in the United States and are largely responsible for producing Black talent in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Freeman & Gasman, 2014).

**Relevant Leadership Styles and Characteristics**

Understanding identified styles and characteristics of leadership in general may help deepen understandings of the different ways that the three Black First Ladies in this study influence those around them. Raven's six power bases illustrate multiple approaches leaders may take to influence others to do what they need them to do (Northouse, 2016). Northouse (2016) offers French and Raven’s six bases of power to illustrate the role that power plays in leadership: 1) Referent Power, 2) Expert Power, 3) Legitimate Power, 4) Reward Power, 5) Coercive Power and 6) Information Power). These power bases help to illustrate the capacity or potential of leaders to influence and affect others' beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Northouse 2016).

While traditional leadership theories are rooted in power models, servant leadership centers on a leader's desire to serve others (Charles, 2009). Servant leadership stands out as a leadership style intimately related to uplift. This leadership approach requires that leaders consider their followers’ needs, empathize with them, and care for them (Northouse 2016). According to Greenleaf, the servant leader’s highest priority is to attend to others’ needs (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf distinguishes between a leader-first approach versus a servant-first approach to leadership. One who is a leader first is often driven by asserting power or acquiring
material possessions. One who is a servant first is motivated by enriching others' lives (Greenleaf, 1977). The subjects of this study have demonstrated persistence in acting for the benefit of others. Each woman approaches leadership uniquely and diversely; however, all exhibit consistency in inserting themselves in the pursuit of the best possible quality of life for their fellow women and men.

Van Hooser (2016) explains that the power to move from a good leader to a great leader lies in the leader's actions' consistency. People will accept decisions, even those they disagree with if a consistent leadership commitment is modeled (Van Hooser, 2016). Van Hooser finds that leaders who develop a reputation of inconsistency in words or actions experience the eventual loss of followers' confidence in their ability to lead (Van Hooser, 2016). Holtzclaw thoroughly examined the importance of consistency and its impact on leadership and organizational success (2012). Holtzclaw's Five Rules illustrate the five reasons why consistency has the power to make the difference between leadership failure and success. Holtzclaw states that consistency: 1) allows for measurement, which provides the opportunity to determine whether or not organizational efforts are effective, 2) creates accountability, which is often the catalyst that moves an organization to successful outcomes, 3) establishes reputation; which demonstrates a track record of success, 4) makes leaders relevant; which provides a predictable flow of information for stakeholders, and 5) maintains leaders’ message; which models expected behavior.

Miller, Brown, and Hopson (2011) examine community-based educational leadership as a vehicle for making meaningful change academically and socially in urban communities. These scholars use emergent themes from Paolo Freire’s critical ideology to explore practical leadership responses to complicated urban issues. These scholars identify several key concepts
from Freirean dialogue believed to be relevant and essential to community-based leadership (Miller, Brown & Hopson, 2011). These critical notions are: a) Humility-leaders remain open to new thoughts and understandings, b) Faith-leaders have confidence in people and draw from the experiential knowledge of others, c) Hope-leaders believe that opportunities for growth and improvement are attainable, d) Critical Thinking-leaders actively seek to change systems and structures of oppression, and e) Solidarity-leaders perceive interconnected destinies and work to improve the quality of life for all (Miller, Brown & Hopson, 2011).

Freirian leadership reaches beyond college campuses into neighborhoods and communities seeking radical social change (Miller, Brown & Hopson, 2011). Community stakeholders (e.g., clergy, organizers, activists) become leaders based on their faith in and historical awareness of their communities. Community-based educational leadership is a delicate balance between critique and possibility. This type of leadership engages oppression, injustice, exploitation, and violence without fear of professional repercussions (Miller, Brown & Hopson, 2011). Leaders who take this stance respond to conflict between school and community differently from those who choose a more traditional leadership approach. Larson (1997) reports that conventional school leaders often default toward safe practices that might preserve their jobs rather than engage in the critique of systems and organizations when faced with difficulties. Community-based educational leadership is immersed in urban life and is committed to urban transformation (Mill, Brown & Hopson, 2011). Palmer and Gasman (2008) note that these institutions’ significance, framed in a culture of empowerment, cannot be understated. They have a rich legacy of cultivating charismatic leaders and activists who advocate for social change.
**HBCU Leadership**

Nichols (2003) documents many of the shared complexities (e.g., preparing students for professions, promoting equality, solving socio-economic problems, keeping tuition low, providing competitive salaries) of the college presidency. While many of the challenges listed above are common to university presidents, certain obstacles exist unique to HBCU presidents. Wagener and Smith note that, since the 1960s, HBCU presidents have been combating the stereotype that they live incredibly lavish lifestyles while their institutions suffer. (Nichols, 2003) Evans, Evans, and Evans (2002) report the perpetual problem among HBCU presidents to secure adequate funding. A 2002 study says that while federal funding has provided some relief, state funding for HBCUs continues to be inadequate (Nichols, 2003). In 1993, Wagner and Smith conducted a case study of three HBCUs. They examined each institution’s strategic planning efforts and found an emergent theme; HBCUs need bold institutional leadership (Nichols, 2003). Freeman and Gasman (2014) report that HBCU presidents have uniquely endured the cruel legacy of Jim Crow laws, systemically unequal funding support, and a myriad of additional disadvantages while being expected to cull and develop high-quality faculty, staff, and students. The tremendous expectation placed upon this unique group of leaders is to manage the legacy of discrimination in the United States every day (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). Freeman (2014) reports that many HBCUs’ survival and progress, amid a national climate hostile toward their core values and beliefs, is rooted in steadfast presidential leadership (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). Dr. Walter Kimbrough is president of Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana. As Freeman and Gasman (2013) reported, Kimbrough notes that innovative HBCU leaders, those willing and able to manage the legacy of discrimination in this nation daily, are highly sought after (Gasman, 2013). Freeman and Gasman report that three-quarters of the college presidents surveyed
reported sharing a sense of responsibility to cultivate leaders on their campuses (Freeman & Gasman, 2014). These presidents shared their need to find the “best leaders”; leaders who understand HBCU culture, how organizations work, and the unique educational environment at an HBCU. This study seeks to document instances where university presidents enlist their spouses’ leadership, who often share a cultural familiarity with the Historically Black College and University experience.

Horner and Williams (2013) have examined institutional approaches to defining and compensating the presidential spouse’s role on college campuses. The authors document conflicting views among the higher education community. The opposing viewpoints have led to a debate around whether institutions should compensate presidential spouses for their contributions. These discussions center around the existing ethical, legal, and political implications associated with providing payment for the efforts of the spouse of a university president. Horner and Williams conclude that if the spouses are to have a role, the governing board should carefully and creatively structure the position based on sound governance principles, ensuring the function is a proper fit for the institution (Horner & Williams, 2013).

Shifting demographics and societal changes prompted the need for HBCUs to make changes to traditional leadership approaches. One such shift includes enlisting the support of the presidential spouse in university leadership. Presidential spouses often represent the universities where their partners govern by engaging in their communities in various capacities (e.g., delivering speeches, volunteering, local board membership) (Cotton, 2003). A review of the literature reveals that the presidential spouse’s role has been the topic of frequent discussion over the last several decades. The debate has focused expressly on the presidential spouses at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). A further review reveals a significant deficit in the field surrounding the presidential
spouses’ contributions at HBCUs. Through this proposed study, I hope to contribute to this gap in the literature.

**Discussion of Female Leadership**

It is important to explore how American gender roles and expectations have shifted over time. U.S. history characterizes America in the 1940s as a wartime society (Evans, 1997, p. 220). As communities mobilized for World War II, Evans (1997) reports that men’s roles shifted from civilian to military life. Women’s roles became increasingly less mono-focused on domestic tasks and became multi-focused on their responsibilities at home and preparing the community for victory. What began as solely volunteer service (e.g., ambulance drivers, food servers, entertainers for soldiers) quickly escalated into a need for single women and, soon after, reluctantly, “housewives” to enter the workforce. This draw on women into the workforce was a problematic societal transition. Though the nation was in crisis, discrimination against women was prevalent. For example, many employers did not want to train female employees because they assumed employing women was a temporary investment. According to Evans (1997), most employers refused to hire Black women, and little systemic childcare support existed during this period. Local communities made efforts to help with childcare which provided some relief but still left 16 percent of wartime working mothers with no childcare (Evans, 1997, p. 224). Despite the numerous challenges, the 1940’s era prompted six million women to join the workforce who had never worked outside the home.

As the decade progressed and many of these first-time employees began to move from blue-collar to white-collar positions, they faced significant hostility from men. Men felt threatened by a loss of authority in both the workplace and at home (Evans, 1997, p.230). Evans documents the struggle that ensued in the latter portion of the decade as men began returning
home from battle and demanding their jobs. Women, well aware of their contributions to national victory, fought to maintain their place in the workforce (Evans, 1997). Evans (1997) describes the position of women in the late 1940s as “the crossroads.” She notes that society praised women on the one hand for stepping in for men in support of the war efforts and criticized them, on the other hand, for working outside of the home and neglecting to raise their children properly. Sociologists describe this space between praise and criticism as the modern woman’s dilemma (Evans, 1997, p. 235). The World War II-era impact is one example of the complexities that exist for women who enter spaces traditionally dominated by men with the intent to contribute and lead.

Scholars have often overlooked the lived experiences of women and their work-related contributions to American society (Schwartz, 1997), because the majority of professional spaces continue to be male dominated (Martin, 2011). Contemporary research supports that men and women in comparable positions are perceived as more alike than different by their subordinates (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Bolman and Deal (2013) assert that while evidence supports the leadership of men and women is equal in quality, the existence of the proverbial “glass ceiling” persists in organizational culture and keeps women from ascending to top levels of leadership. In a 2007 report, women’s activist Irene Natividad speaks to the irony surrounding the steady and consistent increase in the number of women involved in multiple areas of the workspace and the glaring stagnation of women in senior executive positions (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 352). Bolman and Deal (2013) note that a similar imbalance in female leadership exists among the education community. Women make up most of the teacher force, some mid-level management, and just 15 percent of school superintendents (p. 353). There are several factors reported to contribute to the existence of this inequity: 1) Stereotypes that associate leadership with
maleness, 2) Leadership implies a certain measure of power, and many do not believe that women should be powerful, 3) Women experience discrimination often based on unconscious bias, 4) Women constantly must balance responsibilities of home while striving to meet the demanding workload of executive positions (Bolman and Deal, 2013, p. 354).

Historically, women’s accomplishments are less valued, and frequently their work is more critically examined and evaluated than men’s work in similar roles. This imbalanced scrutiny leads to gender-based inequities and discrimination that hinder women from pursuing leadership positions (Martin, 2011). While the lack of appreciation for female leadership is evident, Astin and Carole (1991) note women’s historical willingness to take leadership-related risks. These risks attempted based on women’s commitment to and passion for justice and equality have influenced legislation and policy designed to combat sex discrimination in the workplace (Astin & Carole, 1991).

While the challenges that women face in the pursuit of leadership are significant and well documented, it is essential to note that women continue to make progress. Changing attitudes, increased options for support (e.g., child-care), and shifting cultural views contribute to the steady rise in women leaders’ numbers (Bolman and Deal, 2013, p 354).

**Black Female Leadership**

The leadership contributions of Black female leaders have been notably impactful and woefully discounted for generations. The efforts of Black women to impact society for the greater good, and their own, are well documented. Rodriguez (1998) examines a broad sampling of narratives of African American women. She documents her subjects’ varied experiences, ranging from Black women resisting enslavement to contemporary resistance embodied in the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements. Rodriguez’s analysis demonstrates that resistance,
activism, and service have been constant and necessary aspects of Black women’s survival (Rodriguez, 1998). "Mothering" and "othermothering," explained previously, provide examples of Black female community leadership. In addition to these examples, scholarship documents four additional Black female community leadership archetypes: 1) Community Women, 2) Club Women, 3) Church Mothers, and Civil Rights Women (Edwards, 2000).

1) **Community Women.** In the 1983 article, *Going Up for the Oppressed: Career Mobility of Black Women Community Workers*, Gilkes introduces the "Community Mother." Community Mothers, identified in Gilkes's study, were middle-class women who made the needs of the African American community the driving force behind their own educational and career-related goals. Gilkes coined the phrase "going up for the oppressed," explaining that Community Mothers view the Black community as a collective group of loved ones whose interests should be fiercely and perpetually advanced and promoted. When a Community Mother is in the process of going up for the oppressed, she has committed the vision for her financial and professional mobility to pushing for social change and empowering those who do not and historically have not possessed power (Glikes, 1983).

2) **Club Women.** The notion of Club Women was birthed from an era in American History, developed and driven by Black women, called the Club movement. During this period in history, the late 1800s, Black communities yielded their first generations of formally educated members. Because possessing a formal education provided a significant measure of social capital, and because it was still infrequent for African Americans to obtain a formal education, this group was perceived to be in the best position to attain the American dream. These Black women, either professional themselves or married to professional men, organized to engage in racial uplift (Edwards, 2000). Because of their status in the community, people perceived them
as those who could advocate most effectively. The atrocities inflicted upon Black people by White people (e.g., lynching, sexual abuse, educational inequity) galvanized these women. These groups charged themselves dues and then used the revenue to support the work of programs designed to defend Black womanhood and protect the Black community’s rights as a whole (Lerner, 1974). One of the most noteworthy Black women’s clubs is the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). NACW is currently active and positioned as a leading advocacy group for the Black community. In 1896, this organization used its middle-class status to embody its iconic motto, "lifting as we climb." Members used their positions in society as leverage to access the legal, economic, and political resources necessary to influence Blacks’ quality of life in this country (Edwards, 2000).

3) **Church Mothers.** This unique group of women emerged from “othermothers” and represents an extension of Community Mothers. The distinction is that this group sought to influence African American people’s lives through their efforts in the church (Edwards, 2000). Scholars describe the Black church as the only self-governing organization dedicated to concentrating on the Black community’s needs (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2005). Church mothers, unlike Club women, were not necessarily professional women. Women attained club membership by invitation only, with invitations exclusively extended to professionals or women married to professionals. The Club movement often excluded non-formally educated and non-professional women (Lerner, 1974). On the contrary, the only requirement for Church motherhood was membership in the local church and a desire to uplift others (Barnett, 1993). Church mothers engaged in racial uplift based on their status as members of the local church. These women provided moral and spiritual leadership for the Black community by teaching Sunday school and conducting home visits to care for church members who were sick or
otherwise confined to their homes. According to Barnett and Dodson, society did not perceive Church women as leaders (Barnett, 1993) (Dodson, 1988). Nevertheless, these women strategically and effectively demonstrated leadership qualities (e.g., pooling resources, uplifting others, changing church policy) (Barnett, 1993) (Dodson, 1988).

4) **Civil Rights Women.** Research supports that numerous Civil Rights Women self-report having Club women and Church mothers raise them. These early examples allowed them to witness and experience the kinds of women they would become (Edwards, 2000). Civil Rights women grew up as members of the local church and, as a result, developed a sense of spirituality often attributed to preparing them to engage and endure the relentless rigor of the Civil Rights Movement (Edwards, 2000). Payne reports that Civil Rights giants (e.g., Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker) spoke of the influence that older women (e.g., family members, church members, club members) had on their involvement in Civil Rights work. According to Ella Baker, watching her mother advise community members and care for the sick or less fortunate provided her an example after-which she could pattern her leadership (Payne, 1989). These Civil Rights leaders attribute the strength to persevere through the Civil Rights Movement’s turbulent circumstances to a childhood grounded in racial uplift and a deep faith-based upbringing.

Fortunately, research substantiates Black women’s relentless commitment to uplift their communities through resistance, activism, and service (Rodriguez, 1998). Scholars documented the powerful presence of Club Women, Community Women, Church Mothers, and Civil-Rights Women. History has not been as effective at capturing the stories of influential women who uplifted their communities while married to Historically Black College and University presidents. My hope for this study is to contribute to an accumulation of this unique group of leaders’ essential accounts.
**Paucity of Literature Regarding HBCU Presidents’ Wives**

It is important to note that there are advantages and disadvantages to experiencing the kind of symbolic invisibility that Black women experience (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). One possible benefit to being overlooked is that it could make Black women somewhat less likely to be the targets of discrimination (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). The distinct disadvantages Black women experience where intersectional invisibility is concerned are of particular interest. Sesko and Biernat (2009) explain that because Black women are non-prototypical, subordinate group members, they must consistently battle to be seen and to heard (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). This particular invisibility manifests itself in several distinct ways. Often, Black women’s faces are poorly recognized or “unnoticed”, and their voices are attributed to others or are merely “unheard” (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). Sesko and Biernat (2009) note that Black women are unnoticed and unheard more often than their White female and Black and White male counterparts (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). Studies reinforce the idea that, at best, Black women’s stories have been misrepresented and, at worst, gone entirely ignored by the education community. Drawing attention to how Black women have been made invisible provides a comprehensive rationale for seeking, listening to, and recording the stories of the unique group of women at the core of this work.

This study incorporated a blended approach to understanding the lived experiences of study subjects. Using Black Feminist Thought as the primary framework and drawing on several CRT tenets will provide a robust lens to examine these Black women’s stories. Combining multiple theoretical perspectives should enable a comprehensive analysis of detailed accounts of each woman’s leadership journey.
Theoretical Framework

Research by Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) explains the challenges associated with selecting an appropriate theoretical framework to interpret the lived experiences of Black women. These scholars explain that the difficulty stems from most theories’ general nature (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Hughes and Howard-Hamilton draw attention to the importance of acknowledging the multiple identities of Black women. They suggest Black feminist epistemology is a fitting and relevant framework to apply when studying this complex, intersectional group (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The suggestion of these researchers informs the decision to ground this study primarily in Black Feminist Thought.

Black Feminist Theory serves as the primary framework for this study because it establishes Black women’s ideas and experiences at the center of inquiry (Collins, 2015). The rationale for grounding this study in the tenets of Black Feminist Theory and relevant principles of other intersecting frameworks (e.g., Critical Race Theory) is rooted in the desire to understand participants’ complex experiences most adequately, particularly those experiences identified as common to Black women. Leading Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2015) notes the tendency of mainstream scholars to canonize a few Black women as spokespersons for all Black women (Collins, 2015). This study attempts to broaden the sanctioned select few (Collins, 2015) by listening to voices that we have not heard and providing a respectful interpretation of the study participants’ collective truths. Black Feminist thought bolsters the study’s research questions and provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing study findings.

Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theory serves as the main framework for this study. Intersecting patterns of discrimination lie at the center of Black feminist consciousness (Simien, 2004). Black
In her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (Perspectives on Gender)*, author and respected feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins explains her rationale for situating her exploration of Black women's experiences in the frame of Black feminist thought, instead of the traditional grounding in the theories and perspectives of White feminists. Her decision deliberately privileges Black women’s ideas by situating their ideas in familiar and comfortable frameworks (Collins, 2000). In a similar vein, I searched for a structure that might surround the analysis of my subjects' experiences in an intimate context. I selected the tenets of Black feminist thought: 1) Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning 2) The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims; 3) The Ethics of Caring, and 4) The Ethics of Personal Accountability to inform this proposed study of Black leaders adjacent because it is grounded in Afrocentric philosophy.

Collins (2006) identifies four tenets of Black Feminist epistemology. Collins (2006) notes that each precept stands in direct opposition to more traditional ways of knowing derived from reason and logical observation (Collins, 2006). These characteristics are presented as alternative ways of knowing, that validate knowledge that challenges the status quo (Collins, 2006). As stated above, Collins’ four tenets are: 1) Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning 2) The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims; 3) The Ethics of Caring, and 4) The Ethics of Personal Accountability.

1) **Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning:** Knowledge about the driving forces of intersecting oppressions in the U.S., coupled with the wisdom to navigate them, has been essential for Black’s women survival. (Collins, 2006, p. 275). “Connected knowers,” or those who know the topic of investigation from personal experience, are the genesis of Black feminist
epistemology (Collins, 2006). Collins (2006) suggests that there are two intersecting types of knowing, knowledge, and wisdom. Collins posits that knowledge is gained through experience, and experience is the cutting-edge between these two ways of knowing. According to Collins (2006), lived experience resides at the foundation of knowledge (Collins, 2006);

2) **The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims:** Dialogue, instead of adversarial debate, is used in assessing knowledge claims (Collins, 2006). Knowledge is directly connected to lived experiences, and this makes the author central to and present in the story being told. According to Collins (2006), the story remains intact, in narrative form, during analysis, and knowledge surfaces through continuing dialogue. Collins (2015) contends that the presence of emotion is appropriate in dialogue and indicates belief in the validity of an argument (Collins, 2015, p. 282);

3) **The Ethics of Caring:** Ethics of caring reside at the core of knowledge construction (Collins, 2006). Ethics of Caring are rooted in the African principles of uniqueness and humanism (Collins, 2015, p. 282). Traditional research models call for the separation of emotion and intellect (Collins, 2006); however, feminist scholar and author Ntozake Shange, as shared by Tate (1983), explains that she desires to demonstrate to Western society that emotions and intellect are complimentary faculties (Tate, 1983, p. 156). Collins (2006) posits that knowledge is value-laden, researchers cannot completely free themselves from making judgments, and researchers should examine knowledge with empathy and compassion. (Collins, 2006). Collins draws from the work of historian and author Mechal Sobel. Sobel (1979) explains the pervasiveness of the root word *Nyam* in many West African languages. *Nyam* is presented as the notion that each individual is a singular expression of a collective spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life (Sobel, 1979). Collins (2006) makes the connection to *Nyam* when she posits
that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process (Collins, 2006, p.282).

4) **The Ethics of Personal Accountability**: Black feminist epistemology places ethical and moral accountability directly on the knower (Collins, 2006). According to Collins, an assessment of knowledge is also an assessment of one’s character, values, and ethics (Collins, 2006). Collins offers that for many in the Black community, probing into a researcher’s background and individual point of view is appropriate and well within the confines of discussion (Collins, 2015, p. 284). Understanding prevailing assumptions and personal credibility in the pursuit of knowledge is critical in determining that the one seeking to understand is an ethical human being (Collins, 2015, p.285). Collins presents that many African American people consider the knowledge claims of individuals who are perceived as morally and ethically respected as more credible than those who are less respected (Collins, 2015, p.284).

By design, Black feminist thought elevates the voices and experiences of Black women, a group denigrated by society (Collins, 2000). Educator Fannie Barrier Williams (1987) describes Black women as strong-willed resisters. Williams explains that when Black women are insulted, they hold their heads up, and they proudly demand respect when scorned. The irrepressible nature of Black women compels them to reject the controlling, stereotypical societal images, which tend to relegate them to the status of mammites or matriarchs (Williams, 1987). Crosby (2018) shares five characteristics of Black Feminist Thought that build upon Collins’ foundational tenets. Crosby’s five elements are: 1) Interlocking Oppression, 2) Standpoint Epistemology, 3) Everyday Knowledge, 4) Dialectical Images in the United States, and 5) Social Justice Practice (Crosby, 2018). Two of Crosby’s tenets, Interlocking Oppression, and Everyday Knowledge, surface as particularly relevant to the women’s lives at the center of this proposed
dissertation study. Each of these tenets helped me more deeply understand the unique societal
"What," those occurrences that contribute to the leadership of these women; "Why," the factors
that motivate these women to lead, and "How," the individual approaches to leading, of these
Black women, serving alongside HBCU presidents.

1. **Interlocking Oppression.** Collins (2000) notes that Black women's existence resides
at the intersection of the oppressed statuses of race, class, and gender. She argues that the
marginalization associated with each of these oppressed statuses works together to produce a
form of injustice, unique to Black women, that mainstream research does not capture (Collins,
contributes to the uniquely disparaging images of Black women in society. Collins asserts that
oppressive social structures in the United States (i.e., violence against women) created a common
thread that has bound Black women together for centuries (Collins, 2000). Further, African
American women’s stigmatized identities and the oppression they experience as a result are
intersectional, not hierarchical, or additive (Crosby, 2018). Each of the HBCU spouses at the
center of this study is or was: 1) African American, 2) at least five decades of age, 3) a graduate
of at least two institutions of higher learning, 4) the mother of at least one child, 4) a working
mother, 6) a stay-at-home-mother, and 7) a resident of at least three different regions of the
United States. Their lives and identities intersect. Berger and Guirdoz, as shared by Budryte and
Boykin (2017), report the value of applying an intersectional approach to research. I intend to
honor the intertwined yet uniquely personal experiences of participants, allowing me to "socially
locate individuals in the context of their own lives" (Budryte & Boykin, 2017. p. x).

2. **Everyday Knowledge.** Everyday knowledge is represented by an individual’s culture,
personal context, or frame of reference (Jackson, 2011). Crosby (2018) identifies the need for
researchers to make every attempt to locate expertise or authority related to any matter within the individuals’ lives who have first-hand experience (Crosby, 2018). She explains that outside others should not generate the truth around an issue. According to Crosby, outside others lack access to a genuine understanding of the critical factors (e.g., values, behaviors, events, relationships) related to an occurrence. The existence of cultural hegemony, the dominance of one group over another, has meant that outsiders have historically recounted Black women’s experiences (Crosby, 2018). Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci developed the theory of Cultural Hegemony. As Riley (2011) reported, Gramsci imparts that hegemony develops during periods of decisive political transformation: revolution. These periods of rebellion result in one social class emerging to embody the interests (e.g., thoughts, beliefs, actions) of an entire group (Riley, 2011). History documents that the American Revolution resulted in a single, White social class emerging to shape and control, with physical force and intellectual intimidation (Riley, 2011), the new nation’s societal norms (Muhammad, 2017). Semmes substantiates the white, supremacist nature of Cultural Hegemony in the United States and reports its debilitating and destructive impact on the African American community (Semmes, 1995).

Hegemony resides in American society’s DNA, and cultural hegemony has placed whiteness at the heart of U.S. nationhood (Leonardo, 2007) and has played a devious role in the Black community (Rosamond, 2016). Harris (1993) provides one example of the deviousness inflicted on the Black community through the centering whiteness. Harris (1993) denotes a period in American history when the dominant culture decided that they, alone, were capable of property development and ownership (Harris, 1993). The direct link forged between property and race assigned a tangible value to whiteness, making whiteness property (Rearden & Tallbear, 2012). Leonardo posits that when white ideology (i.e., whiteness) is centered, those in the
margins suffer (Leonardo, 2007). Cooper (2015) shares the work of literary critic Barbara Christian, who equates the devaluing and displacement of Black female thought to what she calls "academic hegemony" (Cooper, 2015). Centering Whiteness at the core of property ownership and development further marginalized the Black community (Harris, 1993).

Christian (2015) suggests that centering Whiteness in academia has been detrimental to Black thought (Cooper, 2015). Brown and Au (2014) report that the broad disregard of voices and curricular histories of people of color in educational material (Brown & Au, 2014). Collins (2015) notes that mainstream academic discourse has widely excluded Black women’s ideas (Collins 2015). The assumptions of Whiteness and maleness are the basis for full group membership in academia. Both of these notions discount Black women’s lived experiences and relegate them to placement as “outsiders-within” (Collins, 2015, p. 15). According to Collins, dominance (i.e., cultural hegemony) has the power to shape consciousness. Developing counter-hegemonic knowledge through the power of self-definition can change consciousness (Collins, 2015, p. 304).

hooks (2004) demonstrates the connections between hegemony and patriarchy, which may help illuminate the well-documented shortage of Black female voices among the narratives of their own lives. White male oppressors socialized enslaved Black males to aspire to become patriarchs (hooks, 2004). Some of them became what hooks describes as “benevolent patriarchs” who exercised power without using force. However, many sought to mimic the standard of dominance modeled by their White masters. The end of slavery initiated patriarchal masculinity within the Black community that tried to dominate and suppress Black women by mirroring the oppressive measures inflicted upon Black men by their White masters (e.g., violence, intimidation, brutality)(hooks, 2004):
They wanted black women to conform to the gender norms set by white society. They wanted to be recognized as ‘men,’ as patriarchs, by other men, including white men. Yet, they could not assume this position if black women were not willing to conform to prevailing sexist gender norms. Many black women who have endured white-supremacist patriarchal domination during slavery did not want to be dominated by black men after manumission. (hooks, 2015, p 92).

hooks (2003) notes that most Black men recognize Black women’s value in the struggle for racial uplift. Despite this recognition, Black women found themselves subordinate to what hooks calls "the superior will" of Black men (hooks, 2003). According to hooks, the influence of sexist norms made it the responsibility of Black women to combat Black men’s emasculation at the hands of enslavement and racism. Gwaltney (1980) reports that while men’s and women’s minds are the same, the act of living forces women to use their minds in ways that men do not have to consider (Collins, 2000). Despite Black women’s proven capacity to innovate and create, society’s expectation was not that they would contribute original thought or initiate innovative programs but would encourage and support their men’s manhood (hooks, 2003). Simien reports that Black women today continue to experience "cross-pressures" to subordinate their interests to protect Black men (Simien, 2004). Research supports that patriarchal gender roles persist among African Americans (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995), which may shed light on the lacking narratives of Black women in the scholarly world. The historical notion that society never expected Black women to contribute or innovate in meaningful ways may connect to why we have not heard the voices of these distinct leaders who operate from platforms afforded them because of proximity to their husbands.

Evans, Domingue, and Mitchell (2019) document Black women's commitment to social justice at every level of the education process (Evans, et al., 2019). Black Feminist Theory is devoted to engaging scholarship, action, and emphasizing social justice equity for women (Crosby, 2018). Williams suggests that activists committed to social justice challenge hierarchies
of power, work to transform institutions by advancing innovative organizational leadership, and insist that research on Black women focuses on changing conditions that subordinate women (Williams, 2013). Shields (2014) illustrates the relationship between social justice leadership and African American women by drawing attention to a significant effect of segregation on the Black community. Jean-Marie (2006) recounts that Black women accepted and welcomed the responsibility of ensuring that community members had the tools needed to succeed in a world structured to deny them a quality of life (Jean-Marie, 2006). Hunter and Sellers (1998) offer Terrelonge’s premise that Black women’s fortitude, inner-wisdom, and sheer ability to survive are at the core of African American’s having endured the long line of abuses inflicted on them (Hunter & Sellers, 1998). Jean-Marie (2006) states that Black women have used their creativity and understanding of the world to mentor community members to success, education, and respect. From enslavement to the Civil Rights movement to the present, Black women have always engaged in social justice work (Jean-Marie, 2006). In essence, the responsibility for improving the Black community has rested squarely with Black women (Collins, 2000). According to Collins (2000), many in the Black community believe that uniting Black people is the Black woman’s primary role and should supersede all other functions she may desire to perform (Collins 2000). Study participants share the same title, “First Lady,” and assume similar roles in the universities where their husbands preside. However, each of these Black women has a unique approach to improving her community, and these unique approaches are of particular interest.

**Critical Race Theory.** Several theoretical principles complement the underlying assumptions of Black Feminist Theory and are used to fortify this study’s analysis of HBCU presidents’ wives’ journeys. Intersectionality and Storytelling are fundamental tenets of Critical
Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006) that lend themselves seamlessly to Black Feminist Theory. Scholarly discourse supports the notion that we cannot understand group identities (e.g., race, gender) in isolation (Greenman & Xie, 2008). I provide an overview of these related principles from CRT and an explanation of how they were used to inform an understanding of the study participants’ lived experiences is prudent.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality to capture the complex ways race and gender impact Black women’s experiences. The intersectionality notion captures the potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances people hold (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). According to Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality examines race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how these factors operate in diverse settings and can detrimentally impact specific groups of people (Crenshaw, 1991), including Black women.

A substantial amount of literature in the field supports the notion that Black women experience a phenomenon called "double jeopardy" (Sesko & Biernat, 2007). Aaron (2019) reports that double jeopardy represents a convergence of racism and sexism that results in a set of different and often unrealistic, gendered, and racial expectations (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003). Aaron (2019) reported that Zane expounds on double jeopardy’s complex nature by explaining that the race and gender of Black women, Black, and female, place them into two historically subjugated and devalued groups within American society (Aaron, 2019). The state of existing within two subjugated groups has made Black women the recipients of prejudice and racism based on both aspects of their identities (Zane, 2002). I intend to examine the narratives of the African-American women in this proposed study through the lens of intersectionality. In doing so, I hope to understand better the complexities that reside at the intersection of race and gender.
Another tenet of CRT is storytelling and counter-storytelling. The notions of storytelling, counter-storytelling, and narratives pervade African American culture (Collins 2015, p. 280). Collins (2015) notes that Black women’s dialogical relationship defines their collective experiences (Collins, 2015, p. 34). Excavating the stories of people of color communicates that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and integral to analyzing and understanding racial inequity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). These narratives, stories, and counter-stories honor the voices of people who have historically been silenced and ignored. Brown and Au (2014) report that educational material broadly ignores the voices and curricular histories of people of color (Brown & Au, 2014). These authors point to White, male, Western Europeans’ biased actions to explain the void of Black narratives in the historical record (Brown & Au, 2014).

In the U.S., the White culture has traditionally had the power to deeply perpetuate and strategically suppress people of color’s histories and narratives (Watkins, 2001). DuCille substantiates the generational dismissal of the stories of Black women. Her 1994 analysis of Black womanhood in the context of feminist theory, *The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies* (DuCille, 1994), recounts multiple periods in American history where White scholars demonstrated a fascination with Black women (e.g., behaviors, anatomies, accomplishments, contributions). During these periods of peaked interest, White scholars received attribution for most of the highly acclaimed accounts of Black life (DuCille, 1994). As reported by DuCille, Austrian-born American historian Gerda Lerner was among the first to devote a book-length study to the narratives, diaries, and testimonies of African American women. Lerner referred to Black women’s accounts of their own experiences as "unused sources" and devoted her work to exposing and deconstructing this overlooked aspect.
of Black life history (DuCille, 1994). DuCille expresses her frustration, as a Black woman, at the academy’s pension toward treating Black women as a commodity. According to DuCille, the perpetual racial and gender othering of Black women has perpetuated the notion that Black women are infinitely deconstructable (DuCille, 1994). DuCille describes her account of the alterity thrust upon Black women as challenging to write and undoubtedly problematic for academicians to read (DuCille, 1994). Watkins asserts a selective and systemic squelching of the voices of Black people. This purposeful silencing leads to racialized silences and marginalization in textual narratives (Watkins, 2001). By eliciting and preserving the stories of the unique group of leaders at the center of this proposed dissertation study, I hope to provide a frequency that lessens the likelihood that these women’s societal contributions will become forgotten aspects of history.

Counterstories are written accounts that cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois introduces the psychological complexity referred to as "double consciousness." Dubois explains double consciousness as the acute awareness African American people have that they are perpetually being viewed through the eyes of a racist, White society and are continuously measuring themselves by the standard of a nation that looks at them with contempt (Dubois, 1968). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) note the legitimacy and power of stories. These scholars offer counter-storytelling as a powerful mechanism for attacking perceptions that deprecate and conceal marginalized groups’ humanity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Society uses a diverse collection of scripts (i.e., pictures, tweets, blog posts, images) to construct a set of agreements that shape the social world. Often these agreements are absurd, self-serving, and cruel (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Delgado and Stefancic report that the
intrinsic deconstructive function of counter storytelling can challenge and deride destructive narratives. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), stories have the potential to provide language that corrects misconceptions and facilitates connections where there may be a divide (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 52).

Chapter Summary

My review of the literature revealed the consistent and insidious historical presence of forces that squelch the voices and discount the lived experiences of Black women in general, and Black First Ladies specifically. A deep exploration of the styles and characteristics of leadership, the evolution of female leadership, and the contributions of Black female leaders to society suggests a lack of will among the academy to acknowledge the society-shaping contributions of women generally and Black women particularly. In addition, there was significant literature to suggest that HBCU’s, and the leadership provided on HBCU campuses are critically important to the cultivation and perpetuation of the Black community. The information in the field related to Black Feminist Epistemology, intersectionality, and storytelling work together to amplify, make space for, and facilitate the understanding of the voices of leaders adjacent.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

This research study asserts that community-centered contributions of the female spouses of HBCU presidents have been overlooked and understudied. Research on the Black experience in America documents the critical need for cultural legacy and demonstrates the connections among a lack of cultural legacy, racial identity, and race-related stress (Johnson & Arbona, 2006). This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of Black women married to presidents of HBCUs. This study explored how the three women at the center of this study chose to use the leadership platforms afforded them by marriage to edify, empower and educate community members. This overarching research question this research sought to address was: What shared experiences do Black First Ladies share that inform why they choose to use platforms they did not actively seek to engage in others’ uplift? The following sub-questions were also asked:

1. What experiences have contributed to the involvement of these women in racial and community uplift?
2. What strategies and practices do these women employ when engaging in racial and community uplift?

Research Design

Education scholars frequently revere John Dewey as one of the preeminent educational thinkers (Feinberg, 2018). Dewey believed that experience is both social and personal and that the individual and the social are consistently present and always in play (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p 2). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that Dewey’s position on experience contributes to a better understanding of academic life. Continuity, the notion that experiences grow out of
other experiences, and lead to future experiences, connected well to this study. Research identifies "standing on shoulders" as one of Black women’s many resistance strategies to manage racism and sexism (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). As also noted in the literature review in the previous chapter, Black women have historically drawn strength from the experiences of African American ancestors (Shorter-Gooden, 2004), and in doing so, become the shoulders upon which future generations stand. Narrative inquiry supported the study of participants’ stories, narratives, and descriptions of events (Creswell, 2013) and invited participants to reflect on and revisit their past experiences and the people and places that shaped their leadership (e.g., taught them, nurtured them, gave them strength).

A narrative research design was a natural fit for exploring the individual experiences of HBCU presidents’ wives who use their leadership platforms to uplift others. The intent of this exploration was to place the knowledge and voices of study participants in the center of the research design. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) share that Dewey acknowledges the imperative need to understand people as individuals. Equally as important is processing individual experiences within a social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Employing a narrative inquiry approach enabled me to develop a comprehensive picture of each participant’s social frames of reference.

Narrative inquiry involves interviewing people around a topic and then welcoming the detailed stories that surface in the dialogue to reveal how participants view and understand their lives (Wertz et al., 2011). Jossellson (Wertz et al., 2011) asserts that narrative research supports the notion that people understand their lives in story-like formats and connect life events the way that authors connect plotlines in stories. People examine life’s events through the lens of beginning, middle, and end. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posit that human beings use stories to
make sense of our experiences, communicate with others, and understand the world. John Dewey once described the examination of experience as the "key to education" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As shared by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Dewey reported that life experience is both personal and social; both are ever at play in the endeavor to make meaning. According to Dewey, people need to be understood individually, and personal experience should be examined in its social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research provided an ideal structure for understanding individual stories within a broader social context. The way people structure and report the course of their lived experiences demonstrates how they connect the discrete episodes of their lives (Plummer, 2001). Narratives provide a framework for organizing time and a structure for sharing lived experiences (Wertz, 2011). I used the participants' stories to examine the impact their backgrounds, choices, and dispositions have had on them and the stakeholders and communities as they seek to uplift. The Three Interview Series supported the generation of a rich data set. The coding steps of narrative analysis guided the interpretation of the in-depth transcripts generated from participant interviews and life history narratives (Merriam & Tisdell).

**Data Collection**

Interviews with the three participants were conducted in 2021 during the Covid 19 pandemic when society and in-person interaction were at a necessary stand-still to stop the spread of the Corona Virus. For these reasons, each interview for this study was conducted using the Zoom platform. In addition to a formal invitation to participate in the study, subjects received calendar invitations and email messages containing the log information and for each interview. Each interview was recorded with the participant's permission, and after each interview, the recordings were transcribed using the Dictation feature in Microsoft Word. The dictations were carefully checked for accuracy to ensure cultural and linguistic nuances were not lost in
transcription. Once the interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy, I employed four Narrative Analysis coding steps: 1) I read the transcript to get a sense of the construction of the participant's story, 2) I read the transcript a second time to identify the different voices of the self in the story and to see whether those voices were in dialogue with each other, 3) I read the transcript a third time to get a good sense of the themes and coherent unity among them, and 4) I made meaning of the participant's story in the context of theoretical literature (Wertz et al., 2001). Four coding steps were employed in the context of three analytical tools for narrative coding: 1) Broadening-a search for the larger context, 2) Burrowing-surfacing details, and 3) Storying and Restorying-surfacing the significance of the subjects' experiences. Adjusting to the Zoom platform was an adjustment made for the sake of physical safety. My position that the process of listening repeatedly, and repeatedly checking for transcription accuracy, served to deepen an understanding of Collins' charge to examine knowledge with empathy and compassion, and exercise Ethics of Caring (Collins, 2006), which is explained in detail later. Each encounter with the data deepened an already existing respect and admiration for each woman.

**The Three Interview Series.** Seidman describes this approach to narrative inquiry as a process that is mutually engaging for interviewers and participants. The Three Interview Series is an in-depth model designed to allow subjects to explore the meaning of their experiences in the context of their own lives (Seidman, 2019, p. 21). Each of the three phases in the series serves a distinct and essential purpose. The purpose of the first interview is to establish the context of participants' experiences. The second interview allows participants to revisit their experiences and reconstruct the details. The third interview provides interviewees the opportunity to reflect on the meaning their experiences hold for them (Seidman, 2019, p. 21).
The Three-Interview Series design helps participants reconstruct their experiences and reflect on their meaning of life events (Seidman, 2000, p.98). In the interest of being consistent with Seidman’s recommendations for in-depth interviewing, the questions most used in this study were derived from what study participants said and not from a traditional interview guide (Seidman, 2000, p.98). Interview guides direct a conversation toward the topics and issues of interest to the interviewer. They provide a clear plan of what to ask, in what order, and how to follow up (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Seidman describes the Three-Interview Series as an in-depth, open-ended approach. He asserts that the series provides enough openness for participants to tell their stories, enough structure for them to impart meaning to their stories, and enough complexity to accept that the findings generated are valid (Seidman, 2000, p.29). Seidman concedes that in-depth interviewers may want to create an interview guide that can help maintain focus on the topic of interest and support participants who may need more prompting than others to begin reconstructing experiences (Seidman, 2000, p.98).

The design of Interview One helped participants develop a focused life history by putting their experiences into context. The interviewer establishes trust before the interview by prompting participants to share as much about themselves as possible considering the topic. During the first interview, Seidman advises interviewers to ask subjects to reconstruct their early experiences (e.g., family, school, friends, neighborhood, work; Seidman, 2000, p. 22). This study’s focal point is the leadership of Black women married to HBCU presidents who use the platform afforded to them by marriage to uplift their communities. During the first interview, I created a context that guided each participant to discuss the events surrounding her early life, college years, career development, and family life. A contextual framework of the leadership dispositions, propensities, and experiences of participants’ lives emerged. During this interview,
Seidman suggests that most questions begin with "How" instead of "Why." Leading with "How…?" guided interviewees to narrate foundational events from multiple periods in their pasts. These past events became the context for an examination of the study topic. (Seidman, 2000, p. 22). See the topical protocol for Interview One in Appendix D.

The second interview guides participants to reconstruct their lived experiences and surface the concrete details (e.g., actions, observations, emotions) (Seidman, 2000, p. 22). Seidman suggests that lived experiences are those events that we often take for granted and typically do not pay close attention to (Seidman, 2000, p. 22). By asking participants to rebuild and describe experiences that surfaced in the first interview (e.g., a typical day on campus, relationships with their husbands, events of a community meeting), I elicited the fine-grained details related to the lives of each subject. Seidman (2000) reports Van Manen’s description of Interview Two as "discovering the extraordinary in the reconstruction of the ordinary." These detailed experiences became the foundation for the participants' reflection and meaning making in the third interview (Seidman, 2000, p. 23).

During Interview Three, the interviewer guides participants in reflecting on the meaning of what they shared in the two other interviews (Seidman, 2000, p.23). The interviewer must thoughtfully lead subjects to think deeply about the emotional and intellectual connections among the various aspects of the subjects' lives (e.g., work, family, school). The goal is to get participants to remove themselves from the details of their narratives, pause, and consider how the elements interacted to bring them to where they are presently (Seidman, 2000, p.23). Vygotsky identifies translating experiences into language as a meaning-making process (Seidman, 2000). The Three Interview Series was a helpful model for converting lived experiences into language (Seidman, 2000). According to Seidman (2000), this interview model
is a "meaning-making" process for both researchers and participants (Seidman, 2000). The desire
to engage in reciprocal meaning making significantly influenced the decision to use this method
for data collection.

There were several important considerations for using this model effectively. First, there
is the notion that there is no perfect model, and there are no absolutes when it comes to
interviewing (Seidman, 2000, p. 25). Seidman (2000) suggests researchers strive to employ a
rational process that they can repeat and document. Second, Seidman emphasizes making an
effort to adhere to the recommended ninety-minute format. While acknowledging that there is no
perfect timeframe for the interviews, he suggests that interviewers must consider all they are
asking of participants (e.g., reconstruct experiences, put them in context, reflect). Seidman
(2000) reports that a ninety-minute time frame is sufficient and communicates to participants that
the researcher is taking them seriously (Seidman, 2000, p. 26). Seidman suggests a timespan of
between three days to one week between interviews. The rationale for this interval between
interviews is that it allows participants to consider earlier discussions but does not allow enough
time for them to lose the connection between conversations (Seidman, 2000, p. 27). Seidman
notes that if this process enables the researcher to understand participants and leads participants
to understand themselves more deeply, the structure supports accomplishing validity (Seidman,
2000, p. 29).

Delgado and Stefancic (2006) explain the prevalent difficulty among members of the
dominant white culture in the United States to empathize with members of society who are non-
white. Like the concept of double consciousness, Collins (2000) puts-forth Audre Lorde’s idea
that Black women have always had to be “watchers.” According to Lorde (1984), Watchers
familiarize themselves with the language and manners of the dominant culture and may even
adopt these mannerisms as a form of protection. Lorde points out that Black women recognize they are playing a game, acting a part, and living two lives, one for the dominant culture and one for themselves (Lorde, 1984). This study crafted a space where the Black women at the center could tell their stories for themselves, without any need to play games, play a particular role, or possess the acute awareness of the double consciousness that Lorde (1984) describes. As stated previously, the academy has under-examined and ignored the journeys of HBCU presidents' wives. Narrative interviews stimulated discovery, insight, and understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of the lives of "leaders adjacent" from the viewpoint of the leaders themselves.

The distinct context in which these leaders contribute, The Historically Black College, made Black Feminist Theory an ideal framework to analyze the study's findings. Through this study, I hoped to advance a conversation that would “open a window into the ignored or alternative realities” (Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. 2006) of Black women in this leadership category. Through this exploration, I hoped to discover whether society’s historical patriarchal nature has played a role in perpetuating the absence of "Black First Ladies” stories in literature.

Again, the first interview, the longest of the three, provided each participant the opportunity to construct the context for her lived experiences. Each woman reflected on her childhood, early education, college years, and life as a young professional, wife, and mother. “How” questions were used as much as possible. Seidman (2019) suggests that questions which speak to how an experience came to be often leads the interviewee to effortlessly reconstruct events and place incidents into meaningful context. This interview provided a foundation upon which the second and third interviews were built. Developing rapport and trust was equally as important as establishing the context for each woman’s leadership journey. The questions in this interview were designed to prompt each woman to reconstruct early experiences. The second
interview supports participants in revisiting significant early experiences which surface during the first interview. The questions prompted each woman to explore seminal experiences in her early years and reassemble the details of those experiences. This interview included questions that lead participants to explore meaningful relationships and outline a typical day in their lives. This reflective reconstruction is included to provide insight into the strategies and practices that these leaders employ as they uplift others. The third interview, on the other hand, provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on significant lived experiences and the details associated with them. Seidman (2000) points out that reflecting in this manner compels participants to examine the interplay of their lived experiences, and to explore how those experiences have brought them to their current station (Seidman, 2000, p.23).

Employing The Three Interview Series (Seidman, 2019, p. 21) allowed research participants to delve deeply into their lived experiences and explore the meaning of certain pivotal moments in the context of their own lives. An interview guide consisting of pre-set, categorized questions accompanies this study (e.g., see Appendix D). The items were grounded in the study topics (e.g., Black Feminist Theory, Black female leadership, HBCU presidential spouses, racial uplift, cultural legacy). Each participant was interviewed three times, and each interview was 45 minutes to an hour long. Throughout the process, no participant needed support reconstructing experiences or topics salient to the study, so the interview guide was not necessary to facilitate the momentum-building process. While the occasional utility of interview guides is acknowledged, Seidman posits that they should never interrupt or divert participants' reconstructions of their own experiences. The interviewer must ensure that he or she does not impose personal interests on the events of the participants’ lives (Seidman, 2000, p. 98).
**Participant Selection.** Howell (2013) defines a population as the entire collection of events interesting to the investigator. This study’s target population consists of three Black women married to current or former HBCU presidents. A review of this entire group was of particular interest and relative urgency because there is little empirical information in the field related to this body. I need to disclose that my husband has served as the president of two relatively small, Liberal Arts HBCUs in the Midwest and Southern regions of the United States, making me a member of this study’s target population. My status as a target group member increased my motivation to document participants’ lived experiences wholly and accurately. I intend to contribute the results of this dissertation study to the educational discourse around HBCUs’, HBCU leadership, and HBCU First Ladies.

I used purposeful sampling and criterion-based selection to identify the subjects for this study. Each study subject is considered an "information-rich case." Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain an "information-rich case" as an individual from whom the researcher can learn a substantial amount. These researchers also point out that documentation of criteria selection rationale is essential (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There were four selection criteria for study participants: 1) Black women, 2) Present or past spouses of a present or past HBCU president, 3) Actively engaged in work in their communities intended to improve quality of others’ lives, and 4) Not an official employee of the institution where their spouse is employed.

1) **Participants are Black women.** Milton and Winn (2017) developed a project devoted to capturing the narratives of Black women. In *Truth Be Told: Narratives from the Souls of Black Women* (2017), these scholars attempt to understand the lived experiences of participants by asking, "How does it feel to be a Black woman?" The foreword contributor, Jasmine Sanders, speaks to the critical nature of the authors’ question. Sanders’ sentiments address the constant
fight African American women are engaged in to be seen, heard, and valued (Sanders, 2017). Seeking and documenting the lived experiences of Black women communicates to the academy that this group is worthy of focused attention. Eliciting and recording African American women’s narratives also supports the development of authentic cultural legacies for young Black girls (Milton, 2017).

2) **Participants are present or past spouses of a current or past HBCU president.** Janet Mock, a transgender activist, and recent autobiographical author, believes transgender women must tell their own stories. Mock explains, “…not enough of our stories are being told, and I believe we need stories that reflect us, so we don’t feel so isolated in our apparent ‘difference’…it's empowering to have stories, unfiltered, coming directly from the source.” (Carbone, 2014). Mock’s answer aligns directly with my rationale for asking HBCU presidents’ wives to share their narratives for this study. I hoped to add to the existing academic literature and bolster the scholarly anthology that documents this group’s societal contributions by contributing to these women’s critical first-hand narratives. I anticipated this work would draw attention to the intersectionality of the human-experience.

3) **Participants are actively engaged in the uplift of others.** Using one's platform to edify the community is a conviction widely held by persons interested in equity and justice issues. Hauhuth (2019) purports the widespread belief that citizens with a platform (e.g., celebrities, socialites, high-level leaders) have a responsibility to use their positions of influence to make social change, fight for social justice, and draw the public's attention to critical issues (Hauhuth, 2019). Harry Belafonte labored alongside monoliths (e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela) of social justice. He used his platform as an activist and entertainer to advance two of the most significant global movements of our time; the Civil Rights Movement in
America and the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. Belafonte notes the critical need for "collective voices that stand strong in leading the righteous response to social issues and challenges." Inspired during a Belafonte interview, writer Mandy Freebairn reports that if one is fortunate enough to have some sphere of public influence, they are duty-bound to use their power for the greater good (Freebairn, 2016). Each of the women selected for this study was engaged in some uplift (e.g., community, racial, gender).

4) Participants are not official employees of the institutions where their spouses are employed. There is a great deal of research in the field related to the connection between motivation and salary. While there is a mixed opinion about the degree to which pay is a catalyst for hard work, researchers agree that, in general, monetary compensation serves as a significant motivator for task commitment (Rynes, Gerhart & Minette, 2004). This study was rooted in discovering the factors that influence participants to devote time, talent, and often resources to uplifting others from platforms they did not seek and for which there is no financial compensation.

I contacted each participant formally, in writing, and informally, by telephone, to extend the invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Considering the COVID 19 pandemic context, I used the Zoom platform to interview the three subjects at the center of this study who met the established criteria (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). I became familiar with the members of this group by association. For the previous six years, these three women and I attended many of the same events and participated in similar community-based projects. As part of each interview, I relied on the rapport I established with each participant and created spaces where subjects felt at ease in sharing honestly and openly. The previously established connections allowed participants to feel free to be open and candid. Applying the Three Interview Series captured
sufficient information (e.g., personal life events, autobiographical accounts) from the three participants and yielded the thick data required for a quality study.

**The Black First Ladies of This Study.** To protect the identities of the participants, I asked each woman to provide a pseudonym and devise the way she would like me to describe her occupation for study purposes. I created aliases or developed general descriptions of other identifiers (e.g., hometowns, institutions attended, institutions where spouses work or worked), cities where they currently reside). I made the choice to delete some measure of detail from each narrative to protect anonymity. I was careful to honor the integrity of each woman’s story when making choices about which details should be excluded.

At the time of this study each participant had earned at least two degrees and two of the participants had earned terminal degrees in their professional fields. Each woman is the mother of one or more children. One subject has several grandchildren, and one depicted her grandchildren as having “paws and fur”. All were actively involved in at least one civic organization, club, or sorority whose mission is grounded in service to the community and the uplift of others.

**Table 1: The Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current Occupation</th>
<th># Years Married</th>
<th>Region of Residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claire Holmes</td>
<td>Licensed Professional and Civic Educator</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Southern U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Rose</td>
<td>Higher Education and Non-Profit Organization Executive</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Northeastern U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candy Ridge</td>
<td>Health Care Worker</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Southern U.S.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Relevance of Culture.** Just as my positionality significantly influenced my interest in and deep personal connection to this study, so did the social orientation of each study subject. Illuminating the cultural frames of reference of each woman was a principal motivation for employing the three-interview series. Yvette Jackson (2011) has defined culture as whatever is meaningful and relevant to the individual (e.g., student, teacher, school, community). Carter’s (2011) work provides a rationale for addressing each study participant’s culture. Carter (2011) posits that addressing subjects on their own terms makes it possible for researchers to understand who subjects are before trying to grasp why they do what they do (Carter, 2011). Having these women reflect on the people, decisions and experiences that are most meaningful and relevant to them helped me develop an understanding of their shared characteristics.

**Thick Data.** Specific to obtaining thick data for this study, Wertz et al. (2011) opine that there is no one measure for qualitative data. Data needs to accomplish three things. Data must: 1) serve the unique goals of the topic, 2) demonstrate relevance to the research problem, and 3) demonstrate fidelity to human existence (Wertz et al., 2011). In an April 2018 lecture, Dr. Tony Castro, Associate Professor of Learning, Teaching, and Curriculum at the University of Missouri-Columbia, emphasized the need for qualitative research studies to yield "good data." Castro explained the researcher’s critical need to select an approach to collecting information that will result in "thick data.". It was vital to identify a method for the collection that would yield a complex array of data. Collecting approximately fifteen to twenty points of data (e.g., interviews, artifacts, field notes) increases the likelihood of producing "thick data." Researchers Giovanni Schiuma and Daniela Carlucci attribute the term “thick data” to the work of Clifford Geertz. Geertz posits that thick data provides the ability to interpret rather than simply describe (Schiuma & Carlucci, 2018). According to Geertz (Schiuma & Carlucci,2018), deeply
interpretive, thick data offers greater understanding. In her article, “Big Data Needs Thick Data,”
quantitative researcher Trina Wang (2013) also describes the importance of thick data. Wang
explains that numbers alone do not capture the emotions of everyday life. Wang notes the ability
of thick data (i.e., intentionally gathered, systematically sampled, shared, analyzed) to uncover
people’s emotions, stories, and models of their worlds. Thick data, according to Wang, has the
power to reach people’s hearts (Wang, 2013).

Data Analysis. My intent to balance adherence to the authority of formal theory and a
deep commitment to "hearing" and learning from the stories of participants led me to employ a
layered approach to analysis driven by the principles of Narrative Inquiry. The works of
Jossellson (2001) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) guided the analysis of the data in this
study.

According to Jossellson (Wertz et al., 2001), Narrative Analysis includes four coding
steps that help researchers understand the lives of study participants. The four coding steps are:
1) Reading the transcript get a sense of the construction of the participant’s story, 2) Reading the
transcript a second time to identify the different voices of the self in the story and to see whether
those voices are in dialogue with each other, 3) Rereading the transcript to get a good sense of
the themes and coherent unity among them, and 4) Making meaning of the participant’s story in
the context of theoretical literature.

Jossellson’s four steps align closely with the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000).
Clandinin and Connelly (Understanding Narrative Inquiry, 2016) identify three analytical tools
for narrative coding: 1) Broadening: This tool encourages the researcher to look for the larger
context for the story (Understanding Narrative Inquiry, 2016). The goal is to make a general
description of the subject’s character or values. It is also helpful to note the social, historical, or
cultural context in which the research occurs. Mishler (1990) suggests the researcher insert what is known about the person telling the story, including their local and general circumstances (Mishler, 1990), 2) Burrowing: This tool surfaces the details surrounding the study subjects’ experiences from each subject’s point of view. The goal is to pay close attention to participants’ feelings and understandings, and to the impact that life events have on the subject, and 3) Storying and Restorying: After expanding the data by broadening and burrowing to surface essential details, the researcher is encouraged to repeatedly reread the participants’ stories to revisit their past experiences across time and place. This tool enables the significance of the subject’s experiences to come through (Understanding Narrative Inquiry, 2016). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) break these three overarching tools into seven steps that guide the narrative inquiry data analysis process. I followed these steps:

1) **Initial Reading**, where the researcher reads through each data piece and tries to generate a structure that explains how the participant became the person they are. The researcher is looking for critical events and key ideas that emerge from the data,

2) **Analyze Story Structures Embedded in the Data.** The researcher re-reads the data pieces and searches for different story elements that can serve as boundaries. These elements include: a) **Temporality** which informs when the events in the story happen, what led to the circumstances, and the implications that events have on future events, b) **People** which explains who is involved in the event, what their influence is, and what perspectives they hold, c) **Action** which represents narrative signs that indicate movement, and provide structure to the story, d) **Certainty** explains the possible meaning the researcher draws from drawn the actions taken in the story, and how participants make sense of those events, and e) **Context** this element speaks to the
locations, situations and conditions in which the story takes place, and how these factors might influence the meaning generated from the story.

3) **Read for Different Voices.** The researcher reads the data pieces to surface different voices of the self (i.e., parent, spouse, teacher) in the story. He or she attempts to identify how these voices communicate with each other and how they illuminate different aspects of the subject’s storytelling.

4) **Three Dimensions of the Story.** Clandinin and Connelly (2000) report Dewey’s three elements of the foundational location of self: a) person and social (interaction), b) past-present-future (continuity), and c) notion of place. These researchers suggest that these three dimensions can help researchers organize stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Similar to Dewey’s three aspects of the foundational location of self as organizing parts of a story, Clandinin and Connelly offer four directions that can inform a narrative investigation. These four directions are a) *Inward* which provides focus on the participant’s internal conditions (i.e., hopes, fears, motivations), b) *Outward* which draws attention to the conditions which surround the subject (i.e., environment), c) *Backward*, which indicates the factors (i.e., actions, conditions, situations) that brought the story to where it is at the point that of the storytelling, and d) *Forward* which considers the implications that the actions in the story have for the future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

5) **Story Construction.** At this point in the analysis process, the researcher begins to formulate a story that demonstrates connections to the study’s guiding research question(s). After analyzing the elements in the stories each Black First Lady shared I was able to connect those elements to traditional story elements (e.g., characters, setting, conflict, resolution) with which as a career elementary educator I am very familiar. Bridging the participants’ story elements to the traditional elements enabled me to visualize connections to my research questions and more
deeply understand how the lived experiences of each woman connected to her engagement in racial and community uplift.

6) **Identify Themes from the Story.** After initial story construction, the researcher searches for what might be the prevailing message in the story. The intent is to surface the ideas that emerge from the story; and,

7) **Consider Theory and Literature.** Once overriding themes and emerging concepts are identified, the researcher considers the story in the context of academic literature and uses theory to fortify the narrative’s meaning. Baldamus compares this process to creating and solving a puzzle simultaneously (Baldamus, 1972, p. 295).

Josselson’s four coding steps, combined with the seven steps identified by Clandinin and Connelly for narrative analysis, framed with Clandinin and Connelly’s three tools, Broadening, Burrowing, and Storying and Restorying, provided a robust system to analyze the study data thoroughly. The search for themes in data coupled with those derived from empirical, theoretical frameworks supported a better understanding of the participants, their experiences, dispositions, and behaviors that were transferrable to a deeper understanding of “leaders adjacent.”

**Trustworthiness.** Oxford Dictionary defines bias as “an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair” (Smith & Noble, 2014). Bias can occur at any stage of the research process and can influence a study’s validity (Smith and Noble, 2014). Glesne, according to Theoharis (2007), identifies trustworthiness as a fundamental component of any research study and suggests that trustworthiness should pervade each phase of an investigation (Theoharis, 2007). I built in measures to support personal reflexivity. I employed triangulation, member checks, and debriefing virtually, using email, Zoom meetings, and phone communication, between each participant interview. Commitment to
humility and constant journal reflection throughout the process enhanced the trustworthiness of this work. These efforts provided an approach to this study that was balanced and fair. My lived experience as a Black woman, a former HBCU president's wife, and an urban school educator give me a distinct perspective. Drawing attention to this helped me be reflective, which connected to the project’s trustworthiness and provided an approach to the work that was balanced and fair. Conducting a total of nine interviews of HBCU presidents’ wives (three per person) who met the requirements for this study’s selection criteria provided a rich data set. Each meeting was approximately sixty to ninety-minutes in length. Paying close attention to consistency with the interview questions’ content, I allowed room for follow-up and clarifying questions as they organically arose. Field notes, recordings, and interview transcriptions supported the development of a comprehensive picture of each participant and ensured study rigor by triangulating data.

**Ethical Considerations.** Consistent with the Institutional Review Board’s three levels of review criteria outlined in The Common Rule, I committed to assuring the protection of research participants’ rights and welfare in collecting and evaluating research. I provided research participants with ample information about protecting their rights, empowered them to make informed decisions about whether they chose to participate in the study. I was mindful of each participant’s dignity and independence and attempted to provide special protections for women who may have diminished autonomy. I obtained informed consent and valued each participant as capable of deliberate judgment. I fully informed them about the purpose of the study and gave them the opportunity to choose voluntarily and without coercion, what would or would not happen to them during the study. I worked to minimize risks to protect study subjects from
possible harm. Finally, I treated participants fairly and equitably, and will share the study results individually and with the academy (Shore, 2009).

**Positionality.** Reflecting on my positionality made it necessary for me to disclose that my interest in this topic stemmed from a combination of my lived experience as a Black woman, my role as the wife of a former HBCU president, and a career urban school educator. This study intended to document the journeys and lived experiences of “Black First Ladies,” women who occupy a uniquely African American position in the community. The women in focus are married or were married to the presidents of HBCUs. Each participant is notoriously involved in leadership activity, whether in the home, church, or community, and uses the leadership platform, made hers because she married a university president to uplift others. This group has been under-investigated in the education community. I hoped to understand the factors that have influenced these “leaders adjacent” to insert themselves, in diverse ways, into their social units to make a positive impact. McNaughten and McNaughten (2018) report that the stakeholders (e.g., staff, faculty, community members) of high-profile leaders (e.g., ministers, politicians, corporate executives, college presidents) often expect the spouses of these leaders to be involved in a variety of social initiatives (McNaughten & McNaughten, 2018).

As previously mentioned, I am a Black woman who has spent approximately ten years as the wife of an HBCU president, and I am an urban school educator. Each of these roles informs who I am and shapes what interests me as a researcher. From an educator's perspective, I see tremendous value in working with teachers and students to examine the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student learning. For more than 30 years, I have crossed paths with countless young Black women with tremendous potential, intellect, and a strong need for cultural enrichment. Cognitive psychologist Dr. Reuven Feuerstein devoted his life's work to identifying
the potential of displaced Jewish children. He discovered that his students’ trauma (e.g., losing parents, being imprisoned, witnessing death) stunted their academic growth and quality of life. The children did not have a deep sense of their own culture and did not fully understand who they were (Jackson, 2011). Fueled by a firm belief in human capacity, Feuerstein was determined to find a way to counteract the challenges his students experienced due to displacement. He discovered that no matter the obstacle (e.g., socioeconomic, cultural, genetic, emotional), appropriate mediation has the potential to reverse negative impacts (Jackson, 2011). On the effects of mediation, Dr. Feuerstein explains, “Once cognitive skills are taught, and cultural experiences are enriched, even the most underperforming individuals can extend their intellectual powers dramatically” (Jackson, 2011).

Dr. Feuerstein’s research is evident in my classroom experiences with young Black women across the country. His notion that young people benefit from understanding who they are and where they come from speaks to my knowledge of best practices in education life in general. Jackson (2011) opines that when students lack cultural experiences, for whatever reason, the mediation of a caring member of the community can accelerate their development (Jackson, 2011). I found a secure connection between the research of Dr. Feuerstein and the mediative role that Black women have historically played in their communities. The HBCU president's wives, with whom I am familiar, assume responsibilities in their communities and elsewhere, with the intent to enhance the quality of the lives of those around them. Through this study, I desired to hear, understand, and share the factors that drive this group of Black women to engage in their communities’ uplift. Three presidential spouses were interviewed three times each for a total of nine interviews.
Salmons (2015) notes the researcher’s critical need to be experienced with the selected interview technology features. I chose Zoom as the interview platform, because I have extensive familiarity with its features. Completing the last two years of my course work at the University of Missouri-Columbia from my home in Nashville, Tennessee, allowed me to become familiar with Zoom’s features from a participants’ perspective which allowed me to develop empathy regarding what participants might see, hear and experience as interviewees. My role as an educational consultant, using Zoom to conduct nation-wide teacher training, acclimated me to using the Zoom platform as a Host. My contingency plan in the event of technical difficulties, which should be expected using virtual platforms, was to interview participants via telephone.

**Research Limitations**

I anticipated three potential limitations to this study’s results: 1) researcher bias, 2) limited time, and 3) the existence of limited data on this topic. Scholars agree that a research study’s limitations often stem from systemic bias that the researcher did not or could not control. These biases have the potential to impact the results of a study in a negative manner (Price & Murnan, 2004). Following Theoharis’ admonition to infuse trustworthiness in the research process (Theoharis, 2007), and in agreement with Price and Murnan (2004), it is critical for the researcher to identify and report limitations. In this context, I considered the impact that my values may have on my findings. I aspired to learn about the lived experiences of African American women who are married to HBCU presidents who use the platforms afforded to them by marriage to uplift others. My perspective as the wife of a former HBCU president, engaged in racial and community uplift, gave me a particular frame of reference that could have caused me to view participants’ unique leadership experiences through an inherently personal lens. Further, the women involved in my study have been classified as elite members of the Black community.
Mikecz (2012) identifies three potential obstacles associated with interviewing elites: 1) gaining access, 2) acquiring trust, and 3) establishing rapport. Fortunately, developing confidence and establishing a connection with the study participants was accomplished through knowing these leaders for several years. Gaining access to these exceptionally busy women presented a particular obstacle and took strategy to overcome. First, I created and adhered to a set interview schedule based on the availability of each participant. Secondly, I faced the personal hurdle of being an exceptionally busy individual who had limited time. This challenge required the prioritization of my research and the practice of routinization.

Not as a limitation necessarily, but certainly as a consideration, it is important to note that I anticipated the data collection process for this study would take approximately five weeks. I expected the first week would be devoted to communicating with subjects, scheduling, and gathering demographic information. I planned to use a combination of structured and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D). As earlier noted, research interview guide accompanied the Three Interview Series (Seidman, 2000) process I used to support participants who might have needed additional support. I allowed space for the participants’ narratives to drive what was generated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Connelly and Clandinin (2013) note the difficulty and importance of providing opportunities for participants to tell and retell stories to allow for growth and change. These researchers highlight that the reflexive relationship between living, telling, reliving, and retelling a life story (Connelly and Clandinin, 2013) demonstrate each woman’s unique path to her current station as a "leader adjacent."

Salmons (2015) explains the viable nature of online interviews as an alternative to in-person meetings with subjects. She identified the ability to easily talk directly to participants “anywhere at any time” as an advantage (Salmons, 2015). The author stresses the importance of
researchers having a compelling rationale for using online interviews as a primary data collection method (Salmons, 2015). COVID-19 has swiftly and significantly changed our world and made it necessary to alter our conventional modes of engaging in standard processes and practices. Infectious disease specialist and President of Meharry Medical College, Dr. James Hildreth, cautions against becoming a vector, or host, of the Corona Virus. He explains that the way to avoid becoming a vector is to stay at home, wash hands, sanitize high-touch surfaces regularly, and practice social distancing (Charleston Chronicle, 2020). This warning from a world-renowned scientist and medical doctor served as my rationale for using the Zoom platform to conduct online interviews as my primary method for collecting my interview data for this study. The Record function embedded in the Zoom platform captured each interview, and the transcripts from each interview were saved for documentation and reference purposes.

**Chapter Summary**

The results of this study provided a sufficient level of detail for readers to paint a clear portrait of the shared nature of individuals married to HBCU presidents, who elevate others from positions of leadership which they did not actively seek. The data set collected was rich enough to promote patterns in this group of women’s leadership behaviors. The patterns that emerged provided sufficient evidence to draw meaningful conclusions about the motivators that drive these women to act.
CHAPTER IV

Findings from Participants’ Narratives of Their Leadership Journeys

This study used narrative inquiry methods to explore the lived experiences of three Black women who are married to current or former HBCU presidents. Specifically, I utilized Black Feminist Theory, and tenets of Critical Race Theory to bolster my examination of the study data. The study was guided by an overarching research question: What are the experiences of Black First Ladies that inform why they engage in the uplift of others from platforms they did not actively seek? The following sub-questions further guided data collection and study results:

1. What experiences have contributed to the involvement of Black First Ladies in racial and community uplift?

2. What strategies and practices do Black First Ladies employ when engaging in racial and community uplift?

While each Black First Lady’s depiction of leadership was distinctive, several common characteristics became evident in an analysis of the data. I discuss three key findings in this chapter. First, each woman expressed an innate quest for knowledge and academic achievement that was nurtured by the adults by parents and family members. Second, each First Lady articulated a desire to make an indelible imprint on the community where she lives and serves. Third, all three participants communicated a deep understanding of herself as a leader, and had a clear sense of identity, which included a non-negotiable prioritization of her family above all else. These findings are important, because they provide evidence of the capacity of Black women to simultaneously persevere and empower others. These findings also provide clarity around shared characteristics of Black First Ladies who engage in community uplift.
This chapter first introduces the three Black women at the center of this study, each of whom is married to an HBCU president. Over the course of three interviews with each woman at forty-five minutes or more in length per interview, I was able to gather more than a cursory review of the significant events in their lives, which informed their dispositions toward the uplift of others. The interview process enabled study participants to reflect meaningfully on their leadership journeys from early childhood to the present day. Engaging with study participants in manner enabled me to seamlessly surface connections among their early life, current leadership, and lasting legacy. Talking with each of these remarkable women on three separate occasions was as delightful and it was enlightening. Each woman shared memories and pivotal lessons learned related to the complex roles they play, and have played, over the course of their lives (e.g., as family members, neighbors, students, spouses, parents, and professionals). The voices of these three women, though distinct and individual, produced a collective harmony that crossed time, space, geographical region, and university institution. The parallels evident in the narratives of this group of women are remarkable, such as their commitment to uplift and their devotion to dedicating time and talent to uplifting others. These traits live at the intersection of the stories of these three leaders. Consistent with Collins’ (2006) notion that "Connected Knowers" are those who know a topic of investigation because they have lived it, the data from this study supports that the three Black First Ladies are Connected Knowers. The three participants are indeed women who navigate and have consistently navigated an existence of leadership and uplift. Further, hearing each “knower’s” narrative, in her own voice, reinforced the tenet of Critical Race Theory that privileges experienced knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). CRT explains that through the storytelling of people of color, Black women, and specifically the three Black women leaders at the center of this study, facilitates a deeper
understanding of who they are and the factors that influence what they do. Tenets of Black Feminist Thought, especially, the notion that Black women have always engaged in the work of community uplift (hooks, 1981), are bolstered through the stories of these three Black leaders.

In the next section, I provide a brief description of each study participant. In doing so, I intend to surface what Carter (2011) calls fundamental character points. I want to provide readers with enough information to understand each First Lady as accurately as possible. The profiles that follow are intended to illuminate the innate and complex essence of these leaders, each from a different region of the country (i.e., West Coast, Midwest, Southern), and shed light on their commitment to the uplift of others. Each woman chose an alias for her name, and they are known here as Claire Holmes, Elizabeth Rose, and Candy Ridge. I created aliases for, or chose to omit, the names of other pertinent demographic information that might reveal the identities of the women (e.g., hometowns, universities attended, places of employment). I was careful to maintain the accuracy of the information shared while protecting the anonymity of each subject.

After introducing each Black First Lady and providing some insight into each woman’s personal frame of reference, I explore each of the findings that surfaced from my analysis of the interview data. Research Question 1: What experiences have contributed to the involvement of Black First Ladies in racial and community uplift? is explored in through the first two findings and the third finding is an exploration of Research Question 2: What strategies and practices do Black First Ladies employ when engaging in racial and community uplift?
Meet Three Black First Ladies: Claire Holmes, Elizabeth Rose, and Candy Ridge

Meet Claire Holmes

Claire Holmes is a self-identified African American woman born to two African American parents, both of whom hailed from the Midwestern United States, and both of whom were first generation college attendees. She grew up in a middle to upper-middle class, predominately white neighborhood. Claire’s parents met in the 1950’s on the campus of a Land Grant HBCU in their home state. As was customary for Black men during that time, Claire’s father, a chemist, and many of her uncles, also first-generation college students and professionals (e.g., doctors, dentists) served two years in the U.S. Navy. When her father left the military he was stationed for two years at two different posts on the West Coast. It was at this time that Claire was born, and also the time when he decided to withdraw from the military. As Claire reflected on the post-military journeys of her father and uncles, she paused to ask a rhetorical question that was encased in subtle critique of American society in the 1950’s. She said, “So, what was the military doing with smart Black men…sending them to the West Coast? but you didn't ask me all that…” Claire also shared that she was born before sonogram technology existed, and her gender was a surprise to her parents. Believing they were having a boy, they had decided to make Claire’s father’s middle name, Clarence, the first name of their expected first-born son. When they discovered that they were having a girl, they committed to honoring Claire’s father, and they developed a variation of the same name for their first-born daughter.

My gender was a shock I was expected to be a boy, and I was gonna be Clarence and in many ways I honestly think I was raised as the first son…so you go out and you do the thing. You handle things.

There exists an often unspoken, and sometimes explicitly stated understanding in Black families that it is the responsibility of the first-born son to “handle things”. Su, Williams,
McMahan and Sudore (2014) share that it is often assumed that the first son is expected to be the primary-decision maker for the family. Claire’s observation that she was raised as the “first son” is an homage to the societal role she was expected to play, from birth, because she was born first. As further analysis of the data is disclosed later, it will become clear how much of Claire’s identity as the first-born contributes to her disposition toward leadership and service.

Claire and her husband have been married for 41 years. She is the mother of two adult children, and the proud grandmother of one “grand-dog”. At the time of our interview in 2021, Claire was an HBCU Vice President and university professor. She holds a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and Doctor of Law degree. She had previously enjoyed gainful employment as a published medical research technician, and as an innovative medical lab technician at one of the top medical schools in the country. She has also been an academic program director and a law clerk in the office of the public defender working to protect the rights of mothers trying to maintain custody of their children. The number of volunteer service hours and time spent uplifting each of the communities where she has lived and worked across the nation are innumerable. Currently, Claire resides in the urban center of a city in the southern region of the United States. Claire is a bold, confident, strong-willed, intellectual with a genuine love for amplifying the voices and nurturing the dreams of women, young and old. She laughingly describes herself, using all of her initials, and declares that “C.S.L.H. is a “whole brand”. Claire uses the adjective “findable” to describe the way she positions herself in the community. For example, she transformed a 19th century house located in the heart of her city’s historic Black community into an office and a convening space. Black women have historically weaponized the front porch as “command central” in the battle for their communities’ collective quality of life. Claire’s convening space not only provides community members access to her wisdom and time,
but it provides a space for people with a vested interest in the betterment of the community a place to dialogue, strategize, and dream. She spends a great deal of time engaging in conversations with diverse (e.g., age, race, class, ethnicity, political position) groups of people.

**Meet Elizabeth Rose**

Elizabeth Rose identifies as an African American woman who explained that she “started out as colored, then Negro, then Black,” and now describes herself as African American. Elizabeth grew up in a small college town in the Southern United States. The small town surrounds a land grant HBCU. The hospital on that campus is infamously known for conducting one of the most controversial health-related studies in history: an experiment which resulted in the medical mistreatment of hundreds of Black men. Elizabeth shared that one of her uncles was a victim of the heinous study. That event, which victimized one of Elizabeth’s uncles, continues to be referenced as one of the most compelling reasons for mistrust of the American healthcare system among African American people. Elizabeth was born seventeen years after that infamous experiment on the same HBCU campus, and her mother later worked in the same hospital.

Elizabeth described the neighborhood where she grew up as a “commune.” She was surrounded by relatives. Her extended family lived as neighbors on the same hill on that HBCU campus. She lived with her immediate family lived in a house in the middle of the hill. Her grandmother lived in a house at the bottom of the hill, and a host of aunts, uncles and cousins occupied the houses that flanked hers. The uncle who was victimized by the experiment referenced above lived next door with his family. Elizabeth’s adult family members were tradespeople (e.g., carpenters, electricians, refrigeration mechanics, farmers). Her Uncle Albert owned a piano and Elizabeth remembers going up the hill to his house, by herself, to play piano at an early age. As the oldest child, Elizabeth remembers herself as very direct. She was not
afraid to disagree but was careful to do so respectfully. Her respectful boldness and independence prompted her grandmother to give her what she referred to as a “special name,” which she did not share. The family called her by that special name during those moments when she had the audacity to use her boldness to “talk back”. She did not recall ever feeling intimidated by adults or feeling limited or silenced because she was young. She described herself as someone who wanted to step in and solve problems.

I'm the oldest of four between my mother and dad, and I think that I was probably one of the most direct voices in my family. I was not afraid to agree to disagree, but we had to do it respectfully…my grandmother, I won't give you the name that they used to call me when I would talk back to my grandmother, but I did. I did not grow up being afraid of adults. I grew up being very comfortable with people and I also grew up always wanting to be the caretaker and fixer.

When we met for our interview, Elizabeth was employed as the founder and president of her own consulting firm specializing in cross-cultural mentoring. She had enjoyed a successful career as a community outreach coordinator and community relations specialist in multiple higher education institutions, specializing in health-related issues impacting communities of color. She has advised and assisted university presidents with student mentorship, recruitment, and retention. Elizabeth has earned a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and a PhD. Elizabeth self-identifies as a “fixer”. She has a passion for mending intangible things that are broken (e.g., relationships, hearts, self-esteem) and has a commitment to problem solving. Elizabeth identified these qualities in herself at a young age, and they are consistent threads that bind together many of the pivotal moments along her leadership journey. She has been married to her husband for 42 years and is the mother of one adult child.

Meet Candy Ridge

Candy Ridge identifies as an African American woman who grew up in the northern section of a midwestern state in the United States. She grew up in a predominately African
American, working-class community. Candy described her community as initially very “close-knit”. Neighbors genuinely knew and cared for each other. Families spent time together and the neighborhood felt complete, lacking nothing, and very safe. Candy shared that at about the age of eleven or twelve, there was a noticeable shift in the look and feel of her neighborhood. The intimate and warm essence she enjoyed from birth dramatically shifted. She recalled,

We all were friends with each other, and our parents were friends. We worked together, shared things together and then they built an overpass on the street I lived on. I think that point is when the community started to change, and it was less communal.

Candy shared that until the overpass was built her community was “accessible.” She and her family enjoyed uncomplicated ingress into every aspect of the community (e.g., parks, stores, shops, neighbors’ homes). She and her community members could move throughout their familiar spaces and freely explore their surroundings with a comforting ease. They could find and see everyone and any one they wanted to freely and easily. She also remembered walking everywhere. The children could and did walk to their neighborhood school every day. Once the overpass entered the space, she remembered the sudden intrusion of busses into the community. She told the story of she and her friends being bussed to what she described as “poorly integrated schools.” As memories of the intrusion of the overpass, and the imposition of the buses interrupted Candy’s recollection of the warmth of her neighborhood from birth to twelve, there was noticeable shift in her calm and amenable disposition. Her emotional connection to the racially charged atmosphere percolating during that time, the late 1950’s, in the United States prompted deep reflections around and the way the changes made her feel as a young Black girl.

One small bus came to the African American community, and we were all piled on that one bus, and when we got to school, we’d see this other big bus driving up with white people in it, but only a few. It became very obvious that we were the minority. We had a bus driver, that if we got too loud, she would stop, make us get off the bus, and walk home from wherever we were.
Candy shared that most of the people in her neighborhood did not attend college, and she estimates that approximately only half of the adults in her community graduated from high school. Her father finished the fourth grade and then continued to educate himself about events happening in the world, country, and Black community by watching the news, reading the newspaper, and devouring the stacks of Jet and Ebony magazines they always had in their home. Her mother graduated from eighth grade and when Candy was in high school, her mother decided to study for, take and successfully pass the General Educational Development (GED) test. After earning her GED, Candy’s mother went on to take secretarial courses and was soon hired as secretary in a local hospital. Candy noted several times that she had two very hardworking parents during a time in American society when typically, fathers worked outside of the home, and it was perceived as a mother’s responsibility to tend to the responsibilities (e.g., cooking, cleaning, raising children) inside the home.

Candy is the second oldest of four children. Her parents raised their girls to be independent, each with her own distinct personality. Candy described the oldest as a socialite who liked to wear make-up and go to parties. She and her sister in the middle were both athletes, playing volleyball and basketball, and the youngest sister she called the intellectual. She very much identifies as the middle child, described herself as “right in the middle”, and called her childhood self a mischievous explorer who liked to play. She explained that she was the one who caused most of the “excitement” growing up. She also remembered her younger self as someone who was a team player and took pride in empowering those around her. This predilection for making others feel seen, included, and capable has permeated Candy’s life and emerges in the findings from this study. Candy has been married to her husband for 49 years, and she has birthed, adopted, and fostered five children.
Study Findings

Author Rosalina Chai, in a reflection entitled “The Beauty of Mosaic” (2020) shares this story:

At the beginning and end of time, Truth was a beautiful glowing orb. One day, the orb was shattered into shards that outnumbered the stars in the universe by one to infinity. These shards became souls. Thus, it is that each soul represented one part of Truth…

The lives of these three unique Black women, much like the shards in a complex and magnificent mosaic canvas come together as part of one truth that illuminates the notion of “leadership adjacent”. From the intricate narratives of these First Ladies, three findings emerged: 1) A Quest for Knowledge and Academic Achievement 2) Creating Legacy, and 3) A Leader in Her Own Right. The first two findings are expanded upon to provide information related to Research Question 1, that explores the experiences have contributed to the involvement of Black First Ladies in racial and community uplift. The third finding expands on provides information related directly to Research Question 2 that focuses on the strategies and practices that Black First Ladies employ when engaging in racial and community uplift.

As described in the discussion of Black Feminist Theory in Chapter II, the notion of Nyam insists that each person is one expression of a shared spirit, power or energy that exists in all living things (Sobel, 1979). Nyam is apparent in the lived experiences of study participants. The themes presented here exist, in some form, in each woman's story. While each story is unique, there is a certain shared essence among the study participants that demonstrates the concept of Nyam: three different women with spirit, power and energy intertwined. The opportunity to have each woman tell her own story from her personal frame of reference was invaluable, and the sections that follow illustrate a deeper dive into the research findings.
Exploring Research Question 1

A Quest for Knowledge and Academic Achievement

The information related to this finding, sheds light on the role that education has played in each participant’s life. Each Black First Lady’s experiences are shared in her own section and each section is divided into three chronological phases: 1) Childhood and Adolescence, 2) Navigating College, Early Post College, and Adulthood, and 3) Developing as a Professional. Each of these incredible women exuded an insatiable pursuit to achieve academically and intellectually.

The women in this study had three distinct upbringings in three unique regions of the United States (i.e., West Coast, Midwest, South). While each of these leaders had a distinctive experience growing up, they share a profound commitment to scholarship and excelling in school. A major portion of the first interview was devoted to the participants’ educational journeys. Each leader was asked to describe her K-12 experience and discuss the decision to pursue higher education. This portion of the interviews revealed a non-negotiable, parental expectation that each young woman would apply, attend, and graduate from college. Each leader expressed a resilience and tenacity that compelled them to persist in the pursuit of academic excellence when others might have given up. This commitment to academic excellence has persisted throughout the lives of each study participant and has been extended to the individuals that have had the privilege of interacting with the women as they ascended to positions of influence in their communities. As Black First Ladies, each leader has invested, in her own way, in ensuring academic and personal learning growth for others.

Claire: Childhood and Adolescence
Claire currently lives in a burgeoning city in the southern region of the United States, and she grew up on the West Coast. Claire’s father worked as a research chemist after leaving the military. He then studied to become a high school guidance counselor. He served as a counselor for thirty years before his retirement. Claire’s mother was a trained dietician and worked in that field until the time of her death in the 1970’s, when Claire was 17 years old. Claire and her younger brother are proud natives of the West Coast of the United States. Born during a period in American history before public schools were integrated, Claire likened her childhood to Lorraine Hansberry’s play “A Raisin in the Sun.” She reflected on the period when her parents had to make the difficult decision about which school she and her brother should attend.

When I was five years old our parents had to make a decision…spend limited funds sending us to private schools, which would have been parochial schools in that environment, to make sure we got a good education, or do they move to a predominantly white neighborhood? They chose the latter, and so you know I entered first grade…at that time in a very white suburb…before the Voting Rights Act, before the Fair Housing Act. I did not grow up in a Jim Crow, but the redlining and the segregation were all there…so, I start off being who I am…You know?...doing that work of integration in the family from the age of six on up.

I learned early during our first interview that the fluidity with which Claire moves between reflecting on a sequence of events and a critical analysis of humanity, such as that contained in her comment above about the connection between redlining, segregation, and her parents’ limited choices to provide a quality education for her and her brother, is remarkable and proved to be a signature catalyst in her involvement in the uplift of others. Her movement from reflection to critique and then advocacy for others is evidenced in study data. Claire’s quote above speaks directly to Research Question 1, about the experiences that have contributed to involvement in racial and community uplift. Claire recognizes that her attendance in her all-white school, during that period in history, was part of the necessary work of integration. Claire
holds that experience as an example of doing her part to uplift her community on her family’s behalf.

When reflecting on her K-12 experience, Claire remembered having a mixture of very supportive teachers in first through sixth grades, and she generally enjoyed being a student. She attended elementary school during an era in the history of U.S. education that was heavily influenced by intelligence tests like the Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale, which was designed in an attempt to measure cognitive ability among socially constructed groups (Dumont & Willis, 2008). While Claire generally reflected on school as a positive experience, she remembered moments, in second and fourth grades, where she felt particularly uncomfortable and marginalized because of her race. In hindsight, she believes that her fourth-grade teacher may have been “too young” to navigate the racial tensions swelling in the country in the late 60’s. She reflected,

For the most part, I had a good experience in school, with the exception of second and fourth grade. As I think about it, I really believe my fourth-grade teacher was just too young to handle what was happening racially in the country. She didn’t know what to do with me.

When Claire was in fourth-grade, America was in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. The 1960’s in the U.S. was a decade fraught with racial strife. Civil rights advocates pressed the federal government to end institutionalized segregation and rallied supporters to end racialized discrimination. These pressures prompted the passing of several key pieces of legislation for African American people, including the passage of the long overdue Civil Rights Act of 1964 which ushered in tremendous social and political reform, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which provided an end to legalized voting deterrents such as passing a literacy test as a prerequisite to vote. These political and social shifts prompted drastic changes in the homogeneous student populations that many teachers were accustomed to. Many teachers, like
Claire’s fourth grade teacher, were ill-equipped and unmotivated to engage with the culturally different students entering their classrooms. Claire, a Black student in a predominately white environment with an inexperienced and indifferent teacher, often found herself underestimated and insufficiently challenged in school. She recalled,

I arrived to school prepared. I had two educated parents and the expectation that I could do whatever they asked me to do in school. My teacher’s expectations didn’t match mine or my parents’, and I could feel it.

Later, when Claire reflects on her experiences as an undergraduate student attending an Ivy League institution. She makes the connection between her lack of preparation at the elementary level to added challenges matriculating at the university level.

Claire: College, Early Post-College, and Adulthood

Claire remembers the race-related tensions in her early years, and she also recalls an awareness throughout her late adolescence and into her early adulthood that she desired to overcome every obstacle, despite the racialized challenges she experienced. In direct opposition to the racialized challenges she encountered, Claire was determined to meet every academic expectation and ultimately obtain a college degree. Several highly ranked schools on the East coast were at the top of Claire’s list of potential colleges. One of her top choices made it on to the list, not necessarily because of the institution’s reputation for academic rigor, but because it was featured in a popular movie when she was fourteen years old. She decided then that the experience she saw on screen was one that she wanted for herself. When the time came to begin making college plans, she shared her top choice with her white high school guidance counselor and she was met with what she experienced as dismissal and condescension, which greatly upset her father. She recalled,

OK this is a true story. A movie came out when I was 14 and I decided that that’s what I wanted, so at 14 I decided I wanted to go the same college where the main characters
went. Obviously, I had been prepared by parents who pushed the academics but when I went and I told the guidance counselor in this public school that I wanted to go to this Ivy League school, they looked at me like “good luck with that” which you know further angered my father, who is now a high school guidance counselor. He said, ’This is not the way you do it.’ and I went back [to talk to the counselor].

This race-based, unfair treatment, and unspoken dismissal of potential and apparent ridicule of her aspiration, made Claire even more fiercely determined to apply to the Ivy League school at the top of her list. This experience of being stereotyped by her white counselor sheds light on Research Question 1 which seeks to identify experiences that added to the commitment to engage in uplifting others. The exchange with her counselor and her father’s decision to act in the face of discrimination inform Claire’s conviction to act on others’ behalf.

Both of Claire’s parents placed a considerable emphasis on academics, attending college, and on developing her identity as an African American woman. The institution she ultimately attended, the one she saw in the movie when she was 14, was not the only college she applied to, nor was it her first choice. Claire applied to five of the highest ranked institutions in the country, each known for having the highest levels of scholarship, world-class research, and academic excellence. Claire attributes her pursuit of an advanced degree to the confidence and sense of identity, direction and vision instilled in her by her parents at a very early age. She shared,

With the profile I’ve given you of my parents, going to college wasn’t even an option...when I went from the silliness of the movie when I was 14...at 16, I'm starting to look seriously at top colleges and Tier 1 schools...I wanted to go to one Ivy League in particular because at that time they had a more robust African American literature studies program... they had the papers for some of the greatest African American thinkers...and I had been raised as a voracious reader. My parents tried to make sure that I was imprinted in African American culture. I had still to this day never been to the college in the movie, but I knew about the others from all of the reading [I was doing], and so I wanted to make a different choice, and my father was like ‘I beg your pardon. You were accepted to the most distinguished college in the nation. You're going to the most distinguished college in the nation.’ So, that gives you some sense of not going to college not ever being a conversation or option. That’s the way I was raised.
By modeling an affinity for learning and demonstrating the value of hard work, Claire’s parents instilled in her intellectual curiosity, a disposition that would propel her through her academic and then professional life. This curiosity enabled her to successfully navigate undergraduate, graduate and law programs, despite feeling that her K-12 experiences underprepared her to demonstrate higher education mastery. In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s American society was heavily influenced by the Space Race, the period after World War II when the United States and the Soviet Union were competing to see which great power was the superior politically, militarily, and technologically (History.com, 2010). This nation-wide pressure to compete, from Claire’s perspective, resulted in her K-12 teachers placing a heavy emphasis on excelling in math and science and paying significantly less attention to ensuring students were well versed in English, history, or philosophy. She remembered,

I was sort of naturally bright child who was attending a public school, I was not nearly as challenged and prepared as I needed to be, particularly in the Humanities and social Sciences. Now this is a point where I think history does matter. I mentioned the timeframe when I grew up, and at that time there was a national, and… local push, post-Sputnik, to raise up an army of students who were trained to be its anachronistic face of Math and Science proficiency. So, I walked into college having taken Advanced Calculus in a public school.

Claire also noted that the deep attention paid to Science and Mathematics created a void in the areas of literature and the humanities. Her pre-college experiences did not, in Claire’s opinion, prime her to excel in her Ivy League Course of Study. She discovered this lack of preparation, in one of her first classes in her prestigious new school. It is telling that Claire looked for clarity from another student with whom she shared a common bond. The connection to Research Question1, which asks [about the experiences that have contributed to the involvement in uplift, is evident in the way that Claire felt safe enough to ask another member of
the Black Community for clarification. Part of Claire’s on-going work in the Black community is to create spaces where people feel safe enough to ask questions and seek answers.

I walked into my class freshman year at the premier institution in the nation and somebody says something about ‘The Enlightenment’ and I turned to a new best, Black friend, who had been to a private school in New York, and I said “What’s The Enlightenment?” and she said “Are you kidding me?” and I said “No.” I could do Calculus but I had zero conception of philosophical things, because our public schools used all of their money for math and science, so there was actually no academic preparation. I had good intellectual preparation but there were specific areas of academic preparation where I was under prepared. I came in and would sit in certain classes and I did not have the skills. I did not have the training even though I think intellectually I could stand on my own.

Claire’s innate intellect and fortitude allowed her to move deftly among academic foci in her search for an area that felt like the perfect fit. She was drawn to the intellectual work and great literature of Black scholars. The works of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and other great scholars, added to her developing identity and caused her to deeply consider changing her major to Education and pursuing a career in teaching. She was met with this feedback from her Ivy League colleagues: “Why are you here taking up space just to be a teacher?” This pointed feedback prompted Claire to conclude that teaching was not a valuable professional goal. Her aptitude for biochemistry and physics generated a short-lived interest in pre-med. Difficulty with organic chemistry was enough of an issue for Claire to conclude that pre-med was most likely not for her. She was also drawn to ecology and excelled in the upper-level courses in that discipline. She was intrigued by the thought of one day joining her professors on the summer field work expeditions they often talked about in the plush wooded areas of the New England region. Ultimately she chose a path that would lead her to a desire that she had never stated but was the catalyst for every major life decision to that point. She desired to create an intact and successful Black family. As noted earlier, Claire experienced the death of her mother at a pivotal age in her development. This tragic loss was beyond Claire’s control. The desire to raise a
healthy family of her own, something she perceived she could absolutely control, was catalyzed by that experience. Claire’s rationale for devoting her attention to building an intact family will be shared in the section of the findings that explores the power that lies in the knowledge of self.

As she envisioned her future, Claire examined each of her fields of interest to identify factors that might hinder the development of the family she so desperately wanted to build. She gathered that the demands of being a doctor, and the scarcity of Black men she knew who studied ecology would most likely be counterintuitive to her prevailing goal of creating a strong Black family. Ultimately she settled on obtaining an undergraduate degree in biology. She remembered,

I figured I could not meet my high goal which was to have an intact family and be a doctor. So being a doctor went away real fast and I ended up with a major in biology…when I stepped back from pre-med and started exploring some of the other upper-level electives in the major, I found out that I loved ecology and the environment and macro systems which is very different than the test tube approach to the kind of chemist my father was, or what I saw doctors doing. I loved that. I did well in upper-level courses and the teachers would talk about doing their summer field work in [woods of the New England region]. I think the unstated for me is the wanting of the Black family.

Claire was making great gains as a scholar. She was becoming very accomplished, and her academic excellence was proven time and time again. She could have easily been chosen to concentrate her future plans solely on course work, yet what was at the top of her mind and in the center of her heart was the creation of her own, stable family. In the quest for selecting a career that would sustain a healthy family Claire leaned into her strengths as a scientist, though she never abandoned her love for the humanities and literature that she discovered in her final year as an undergraduate. She recalled,

One of the very last courses is Senior Seminar taught by [professor’s name] who is now full professor, I think at Stanford, and he specialized in Richard Wright studies. He taught a course about Richard Wright second semester, senior year. I’m walking out the door and that’s when the angels sang. It’s sort of like I should have done this, which was also kind of ‘I told you daddy’, and if I got into that other Ivy I probably would have gone in
that direction, and that launched me on my lifelong adult reading and all of that, and it was clear to me that it took a visiting professor, visiting professor, to bring the course, the content, and create the community where for the first and only time in an academic space at the Ivy I chose, I felt like I was at home.

The moment “the angels sang” served as a central episode in Claire’s leadership development. In that moment, she allowed herself to see the possibility of a professional future that incorporated what she did well and what she was passionate about. The righteous indignation in her reflection is palpable. She was acutely aware of the absurdity that the intellectual stimulation that so powerfully captured her attention came from outside the institution that her father insisted she attend because it was the best and because she had been accepted.

This example of parental influence impacting a child’s choices, speaks to Research Question 1 as an experience that impacted Claire’s own parenting. Claire’s father sent her to the university that he believed she should attend to give every advantage and ensure her quality of life. She was not given the autonomy to attend her college of choice. I asked Claire if her father’s approach to guiding her academic path was reflected in her role as the architect of her own family and specifically the academic trajectories of her own children. She shared,

Our children are 10 years apart, so I feel like two Claire’s are answering this question. With our daughter, I truly believe that my childhood narrative was in my ear, and that it informed the way I was advising her. She was socialized by both of us to lean toward the HBCU experience. It wasn’t mandatory, but the esteem for HBCU’s was all around her. I was a huge fan of Johnetta B. Cole, former president of Spelman College, and I just knew she was going to graduate from there. I also encouraged her to cast her net wide. She ultimately fell in love with [a premiere private school in the south], chose to study pre-med there, was poorly advised and poorly supported there, and ended up coming home due to academic failure fairly soon after she went. That’s the only time in her academic career that she experienced academic failure. When my son goes to college 10 years later, I’m different. He’s a different student…neuro, and socio different. I’m more child-centered in my thinking. At this point, I was not governed by anyone’s else’s opinions or making anyone else’s choices. He needed what he needed.

Claire laughed and she added,
As far as I can see, they both turned out alright, but as, my father used to say, ‘the jury’s still out’.

While using her scientific prowess to leverage her early career and launch a healthy family, Claire’s innate intellectual curiosity and passion for teaching and academia were never far from the surface of her aspirations, and both of these qualities would eventually emerge and be nurtured, as Claire’s professional persona developed. Study data supports that Claire created a professional path for herself that has fully integrated her innate scientific strengths, and her deep seeded love for the humanities. This melding of her professional identities helps to answer Research Question 2, that seeks to understand the ways that Black First Ladies engage in uplift. We see Claire’s identities manifested, consistently, through her mentorship of others and advocacy work. She effortlessly listens to others, and strategically probes, seeking to understand individual and collective strengths, passions, and potential sources of conflict. She uses what she gathers to connect people and enable them wherever and whenever the opportunity to do so presents itself.

**Claire: Developing as a Professional**

Claire’s reflection on her early years, make very clear that she has held two aspirations for as long as she can remember: 1) to have a healthy Black family, and 2) to advocate for those who are, for whatever reason, unable to advocate for themselves. When I asked Claire how she selected her career path, she laughed and explained it as less “selecting “and more “falling into” things. She and her husband met the second week of their freshman year of college, started dating in their junior year and became seriously committed to each other at some point during their senior year. At the point of graduation, they were certain of a few things. First, they each knew that they had found a life partner. Also, they knew that they both possessed degrees and skill sets that made them highly employable. Additionally, they understood that Claire’s
boyfriend, soon-to-be husband, who was pursuing his Ph.D., had just won a Rhodes Scholarship that would take him overseas. Lastly, they felt fortunate to have found in each other someone on the same page in terms of background, ambition, and the long-term goal of raising a family.

The rules for Rhodes Scholars dictated that scholars could not be married during the first year of the program. They could, however, bring spouses over during the second year. Claire had no intention of going to England unmarried and without a job, so for the first year of her then-boyfriend’s program, she put her science aptitude to work and secured a job as a lab technician at a local, and prestigious university.

I met him…the second week of freshman year, but we didn't really start going out until maybe junior year and became pretty close and committed to each other by senior year, so by this time it’s beginning to look like OK, this is the life partner, you’re getting ready to graduate. I'm going to graduate with an undergraduate degree in biology and we knew before he walked across the stage that he had been awarded a Rhodes scholarship so that meant that marriage wasn’t gonna happen, the first stop was in England, and the scholarship in part determined our marital trajectory because they were not allowed to be married their first year. The second year of the scholarship you could be married and bring a spouse over… so I couldn't go to England with a green card not being married, so my first thing was I had to find a job for one year while he was over there. I was a lab technician, a medical research lab technician at a top research institution. So then we get married, we fly over to Oxford England and were there for two years while he finished his PhD, and I have, you know, a resume that's this long [pinches fingers together]. I have an undergraduate degree in biology, and I have been a medical research technician for one year, so guess what I did for two years in Oxford England? I was a medical research technician.

Claire’s aptitude in the sciences provided her with a unique skill set. During the time that Claire entered the professional arena there were few women, and significantly fewer women of color represented in her field. Claire’s scientific specialty is of particular interest to this study because of the Covid-19 crisis we have been battling at the local and global levels since 2019. Claire was not simply a general lab technician, but she was specifically trained to develop a type of biologic medicine that plays a central role in supporting the medical community in enhancing immune system functions. She was at the forefront of developing the medicines and technologies
that are facilitating the deft navigation of the existing, relentless pandemic. Claire’s confidence in her own competence is a trait that propelled her to excel as a student, professional, and community leader.

I was a really good technician. I used to say I was a ‘brilliant cook’. I had high purity, and high yield. If you ask me what it meant I was like. “I don't know. I’m just really good, and the monoclonal antibody, if that sounds familiar to you, that's what’s in the blood immunity of people who have had COVID 19. That's it. I did that well. I learned some technologies… the whole, ‘How to make a monoclonal antibody’ [laughter], alright I actually made monoclonal antibodies… So, in very short order, you had this precious kind of new technology and I'm a tech in the lab. I learn how to do that, so we finish there… fast forward to now, I am 4th author on a paper that was published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Ironically, the professional path of Claire’s husband has led him to serve as one of the leading voices combatting the spread of Covid 19. The specialized knowledge for which her husband is rightfully lauded, is the same privileged knowledge in which Claire was immersed at the start of her professional journey. This professional development and specified training provide Claire with invaluable competencies and unshakable confidence that allow her to move fluidly and assuredly in circles that include some of the premiere scientific minds in our nation. Claire was one of a few Black women scientists at this time, and certainly one of a handful of African American women scientists engaged in this particular kind of science in another country. Leading is what Claire has always done. The notion of leadership adjacent is exemplified as Claire’s relocation to the UK with her husband. She had amassed a highly marketable skillset which she put to use as she supported her husband’s leadership development.

Claire’s unique set of skills served as a type of professional currency when the time came for her and her husband to transition from Oxford, England to the United States at the completion of his Ph.D. program. He was admitted to a top-notch medical school on the East Coast to continue his studies. Claire gave birth to their first child, took a four-month maternity
leave and then decided it was time to go back to work. She used her professional currency to go back to the work that was familiar to her, the science lab, and after a short period in that safe and comfortable space, she was prompted by a respected mentor to expand her sphere of influence. This proverbial push from the nest would profoundly change her life. She reflected,

[My husband] graduates and we show up …so that he can attend medical school. I'm seven months pregnant, give birth to my first… stay home for four months and then I start working part time and what do I do? I work part time as a medical lab technician at the same [top-notch medical school where her husband is a student] because my resume is only this big [fingers pinched closely together] but one of the things I can do is make monoclonal antibodies and I did and I did that for a year and a half until the late great chair of the Pharmacology Department, brought me into his office and politely kicked me out. He says, “You're going to have to fish or cut bait. Either you need to go to graduate school and become a scientist, or you need to do something else, because you cannot hide in this lab anymore. So, I applied to law school believing that I would ultimately go back and get a Master of Public Health in Maternal and Child Health, because I hope you hear a theme, Yes. Healthy family.

Claire shared this story of her path to law school, as an example of her “falling into things”. While it may seem that this shift was serendipitous, it is easy to see that it was precipitated by an honest and straightforward push from a job that had afforded her an ample measure of success, to a career that would enable her to realize her ultimate goals professionally and personally. Claire’s academic and professional experiences led to a career in law. When I asked her how she decided on going to law school she reiterated the draw toward mending and developing healthy Black families, which ultimately led her providing legal services to protect children and families.

The child dependency area, the child abuse and neglect…spoke to me as I started experiencing it as a law clerk. This doesn't tell you how I got to law school but when I started thinking about which offer I would accept when I graduated, I went from being a law clerk straight into my first gig as an attorney in that child abuse neglect division, because I was drawn to that strain of healing broken families and advocating for everybody who needed the systems and services to put them back together.
Law school and the career that followed in family advocacy, conflict resolution and the professoriate, increased her professional skill set and sent her on a trajectory to 1) accomplish her goal of having a healthy Black family, and 2) advocate for those who could not advocate for themselves. Claire acknowledged that life circumstances added to her choice of employment. Being a young wife with a husband pursuing a medical degree and having a young child meant to Claire that working was a necessity.

I went to law school and became a law clerk because we were dirt poor. My husband is in medical school. We have a toddler. We have no money, somebody has to work. I tried to find somebody to hire me. The office of the public defender hired me and they did because now the resume is this big [indicates larger pinch with her fingers] and it says something that they interpret as ‘You can probably read medical records, so we want you to be a law clerk in the Child Abuse Neglect Division, so you can help the lawyers understand the defense of mothers who are trying to get their kids/prevent their kids being taken away from them, and put into the foster care system’. So, I was a law clerk in that area, this is 1985, the beginning of the crack epidemic, and that became my passion and I realized that when I finished I wasn't gonna go get the MPH I went into the office of the public defender and that was the next 15 years of my career.

When Claire’s family relocated to the city where she currently lives, still operating from a position that prioritized family above all else, she stopped practicing law to raise her second child. Eventually, her insatiable quest for knowledge led her to consider her next professional endeavor, which was and continues to be deeply rooted in the uplift of her community through activism, and academia. She reflected,

We moved here in 2005 for my husband's job which meant that I stopped practicing law. I’m still licensed in that jurisdiction. I'm not licensed in this jurisdiction. I needed to finish raising the younger child because my children are 10 years apart and it was not until 2010 when I stopped and said “OK what's the second act?” and I went to a local university to earn my Masters in Conflict Management, and that launched a seven year career as a director of an academic graduate program, and an unpaid career in civic engagement, for the city, developing community relationships and working to ensure accountability for those in positions of authority, and now, here I am employed by this local HBCU.
Claire continues to enjoy a multifaceted, ever evolving career. Her conflict resolution skills have been utilized countless numbers of times to resolve community tension and unrest. Her uncanny ability to bring people together to arrive at consensus around sensitive topics is renowned nationally by organizations and entities grounded in public interest. Some examples include ecumenical groups seeking to promote racial harmony, activist groups focused on issues of equity and justice, and academic organizations seeking to engage in intellectual discourse around complex societal subject matter. She is hailed locally as a ‘convener of the people’. Her intellectual curiosity, discovered and nurtured as a child, fueled a relentless pursuit of academic excellence which facilitated a fruitful professional life. Further review of the data in this chapter will demonstrate how giving herself permission to “fall into things” created the perfect conditions for her to create the healthy family she longed for and to nurture the community she cared for so deeply.

As a Black First Lady, Claire’s enduring intellectual curiosity operates as a flint striking against steel and to ignite a metamorphic fire. Motivated by an interest in enhancing the lived experiences of others, she uses her platform as a community leader to inspire transformation. She orchestrates opportunities for the power of knowledge to converge with the will and commitment of like-minded people. This combination of forces often leads to positive change. For example, her desire to facilitate conversations around antiracism, prompted her to co-organize a 2018 bus trip to the National Museum for Peace and Justice and the Equal Justice Institute in Montgomery, Alabama. The attendee group was diverse in multiple ways (i.e., race, gender, education, religion, class, political party), and over the course of one entire day, two impactful destinations, and numerous courageous conversations, this mixed group formed lasting bonds around the common purpose to flourish peacefully in the same city. Another example of Claire’s inserting
herself and her skillset to inspire change happened when, shortly after the tragedy of Mr. George Floyd’s public murder at the hands of law enforcement officers, a local church was moved to convene a diverse group of community voices to “listen and learn from each other”. They asked Claire to help them envision and then structure what a productive series of conversations could look like. This led to Claire facilitate a specialized training for approximately 40 “Table Facilitators”, who learned to observe, advance, and mediate productive conversations around extremely sensitive topics. The training was followed by the first of several community forums. The Claire-trained Table Facilitators engaged community members in a series of conversations designed to foster genuine hearing, and ultimately healing. These examples demonstrate that Claire is not only committed to deepening her own understandings around the history and devastating impact of racism, isolation, and marginalization in the U.S., but her inclination to touch the spirits of others demonstrates uplifting as she rises. Research Question 2’s focus on the strategies used by these Black First Ladies to engage in uplift is exemplified in Claire’s ability to empower community members through specialized training in conflict resolution.

Elizabeth: Childhood and Adolescence

Elizabeth currently lives in an established metropolitan area on the Atlantic Coast, and she grew up in the heart of the American south. Elizabeth Rose started Kindergarten at four years old in her small college town, surrounded by family. As earlier noted, she attended a Catholic school and her mother reminded her that she repeated Kindergarten for a second year, because the school leaders did not want to advance her to first grade until she was older. She entered first grade at almost 6 years old. The experience she gained in her first year as a Kindergarten student gave Elizabeth a strong sense of empathy. She remembered what it felt like to be in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar faces without the support of those who you were
absolutely certain loved you and had your best interests at heart. When I asked her how she and her close-knit community would describe young Elizabeth, she described herself as a “fixer,” or one who always wanted to be a caretaker. She gave an example that demonstrated how she activated her desire to care for people and fix problems by asking the nuns at her school for a special responsibility.

I remember saying to the nuns, ‘May I stand at the door with you and greet all of the children who are crying, and assure their parents that they will be OK and that we will take care of them?’ Yes. I think that that's how one would describe young Elizabeth as a person who just sort of wanted things to be right for everybody.

The persistent disposition to ensure that conditions were viable for all to succeed is evident during every phase of Elizabeth’s development. Whether she was greeting her green Kindergarten classmates, encouraging her undergraduate schoolmates, or mentoring her professional colleagues, Elizabeth has an intuitive proclivity to affirm, assure and empower others.

Like Claire, Elizabeth has vivid memories of her developmental school years. When I asked her to describe her K-12 experience, Elizabeth expressed that it was predominately joyful. She was careful to share that there were some complexities associated with her early school experiences and attributed her joy to a sense of safety. This sense of safety is something that she would cherish and attempt to create for those in her presence up to the time of this study. Her fearlessness in the presence of adults referenced earlier as exemplified in the confidence to freely speak her mind that prompted her grandmother to give her a “special name”, can be seen as she reflected on being a left-handed student in her Catholic school during a time in American society that many contemporary Catholic schools, and others, held the belief that the left hand had diabolical associations (Coren, 1993).
School was joyful. It was meaningful and sometimes it was complicated in the sense that the joy came from being able to be in a safe environment [in school]. I always felt good and safe and that I could learn. I always felt that I was learning something every day in my classroom, especially in Kindergarten through the 5th grade. I think the complexity was that I was left-handed in a Catholic school and being left-handed in a place where they wanted things to be right, made it a little more challenging for me and for the Sisters who could not change me.

Elizabeth had a strong sense of identity and confidence early in her development. Elizabeth’s academic disposition was that of a child who expected to be taught. She knew that she was going to school to learn, and she looked forward to entering, unapologetically, as herself, to build upon the intellectual foundation that her family laid for her. As mentioned previously, Elizabeth grew up surrounded by family. Her affinity for schoolwork and learning was heavily influenced by her relatives and the multiple ways that they shared their collective literacies with her. She had a holistic view of learning. Elizabeth believed that learning growth was meant to occur in the classroom, in the community and at home. Her reflections about her early schooling articulate this holistic perspective. She said,

I was born into a family of poets, and people who just loved education and learning and I remember, we had a yard that was part dirt and part grass. My aunt…Aunt Mary… who was a teacher would teach us all, or maybe it was just me, how to write ABCs in the sand. So, I feel like my learning was not only in school. It was at home. It was in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood was my family.

Elizabeth initially attended a Catholic elementary school. She pointed out that the students who attended her Catholic school were predominately Black and the teachers, all nuns, were white. As she thought about whether the differences in race impacted her perception of her teachers or her feelings of safety, as a Black child who was surrounded by family from birth to school age, in the American South in the late 1950’s, she indicated that neither her teachers nor she seemed to place a significant emphasis on skin color. She reflected,

All of my teachers were White nuns. I resent sometimes when people say ‘I don't see color’ but, it's amazing, I can honestly say when I was in the classroom with those nuns,
color was the last thing I thought about with them. They had on their habits. I think that I thought more about how they treated me and others than the color of their skin. Some were mean and some were kind. Some were very rigid, and some were flexible.

The private Catholic school that Elizabeth attended was in her neighborhood, which may account for her feeling of safety in school. The physical building was within walking distance from her home, and she walked to school with her father every day. Often on those walks down the hill, he would stop by his place of employment to show her where he worked. Scholarship and hard work were literally embedded in every step of Elizabeth’s early educational journey. Elizabeth will reflect later in this chapter on the occasional chaos that existed at home, due to her father’s battle with alcohol addiction. The proximity and the predictability of the daily rituals and routines at school provided a sense of relational and emotional safety that was occasionally lacking at home. Elizabeth’s commitment to create safety for others, later in life, through her efforts at work and in service is deeply nested in her own childhood need to feel safe.

Elizabeth’s family immersed her in the love for and critical importance of learning. She was saturated in learning at home, in her neighborhood, and at school. The adults that surrounded Elizabeth left no room for doubt that educating oneself was critical to one’s success, and they allowed no place for her to question the value that Black people placed on education. Her family members, who were her early teachers, taught her academic skills and concepts with great discipline wrapped in messages of love and family. They expected her to work hard, and they lovingly nurtured her to do so. This balance between love and learning cemented Elizabeth’s belief that learning spaces, whether on the dirt yard or within the four walls of the schoolhouse, were safe spaces where students should be nurtured, protected, and inspired.

The mindsets of the nurturing community of Black teachers with whom Elizabeth began her educational journey stood in stark contrast to the harsh and harmful “mentalities” of Southern
Whites during her early development. As referenced in the section of this document devoted to the history of HBCUs, just two generations before Elizabeth entered school it was against the law for Black people to read or write. There was a palpable fear that educating Black people would mean the subversion of White society (Williamson, 1985). These Southern white mentalities Willimason (1985) eludes to meant that everyday experiences (e.g., playing, traveling, shopping, learning) were anything but safe for the majority of Black children growing up in the Southern region of the United States. Scholar and activist bell hooks (1994) defines education is the “practice of freedom” where both teacher and student share an equal contribution to the learning experience. The strategic plot to suppress the education of Black people meant that bell hooks’ liberatory perspective on education would escape Black people for almost one-hundred years by law, and then for an additional one hundred years by Jim Crow policy in American South. These destructive mentalities which stand opposed to the emancipatory impact of education for Black people, and specifically Black women, regardless of law, have persisted in the Unites States and presented particular obstacles for scholars coming of age during the time that Elizabeth began her formal schooling.

Elizabeth: College, Early Post-College, and Adulthood

When asked to reflect on the point that she knew she was going to college, Elizabeth expressed the same resolute conviction that Claire did. She simply never knew that college going, and ultimately gainful employment, were optional. She swiftly shared,

Well first of all, I never knew you didn't go to college, because I was born on a college campus it was a part of my community. My dad went to college. My mother went to college… My mother went to a boarding school. She earned her associate degree there and then she came to the university that eventually became our community and met my dad, and when she married my dad, she had me at around 24. She worked in elementary education, but then she stopped because she had me.
Elizabeth’s parent provided the blueprint that would guide her academic choices. The notions of scholarship and academic excellence came second nature to her because of the examples set before her by her parents. She described the sequence this way,

For me, college going was not an option. It was not. It was all a part of our community. Learning was all a part of our community. First you go to Kindergarten, then you go to middle school, then you go to high school, then you go to college. Graduate school, that was the option.

Elizabeth attended undergraduate school at the same institution, and on the same campus that surrounded her childhood home. The description of her experiences as an undergraduate student on the campus of the institution that she knew so well sounded very much like the disciplined, nurturing her family provided during her early years. She remarked,

The university campus was like my playground. It’s where my parents worked. I knew it from childhood, and I always felt welcome. I knew you were there to work, to earn my degree, no matter what. No matter what your learning style was, you were there to work. It was fun too, so not only did you work hard, you played hard, so you felt like it was sort of balancing you out and taking you to the next level of development.

These traits, of hard work and enjoyment, discipline, and nurturing, are qualities that she exemplifies and promotes in her interactions with employees, mentees, and friends as a First Lady. When elicited, Elizabeth takes great pride in providing practical advice, rooted in her own life lessons, always rooted in truth, and carefully wrapped in love. Elizabeth shared a story of a weekend when she and her husband attended the inauguration of an HBCU president. Elizabeth’s husband was invited to be the inaugural speaker and Elizabeth strategically and intuitively positioned herself closely to the new First Lady. Elizabeth had grown accustomed to the extensive ritual and demand of HBCU inaugurations. HBCU Presidential inaugurations are historic events filled with beautiful and days-long celebrations of new leadership and possibility. They can be emotionally and physically demanding on the new president and his or her family.
Throughout the numerous ceremonial events of the weekend Elizabeth graciously and gracefully shared wisdom with the new First Lady. She reflected,

I sat beside her at every event. I was silent, observing. I watched this young woman support her husband and navigate spaces with poise and grace. From time to time I would quietly ask, ‘How you doin’?’. Because I know the toll this kind of celebration takes on the spouse. Whenever I felt it appropriate I reminded her, ‘You are doing a great job. Remember that you know who you are, and you know the strengths that you bring to this institution.’

Elizabeth encouraged this new First Lady by reminding her of her own strengths. This quiet, experience-based mentorship binds Elizabeth extremely close to her mentees. She makes it a point not to insert herself until she is invited. Once she receives the invitation to enter, she does so honestly and without judgement. It is as if she converts the challenges she has overcome into a proverbial slide deck of teachable moments to share with those for whom she cares. This transparent approach to mentorship creates life-lasting bonds and fosters incredible trust.

Several of the challenges that Elizabeth faced, came during her years as an undergraduate student. She reflected on some of those challenges and how she overcame them during our interview. Her major obstacles were related to that lack of financial resources. One remedy for her financial challenges was leaning on the relationships and connections she developed in her early years. Many of the community members who watched Elizabeth grow up found themselves in positions of influence on campus when she arrived. She was able to leverage her parents’ reputations and ‘good names’ as hard working, honest community members to secure the funds she so desperately needed. The lessons she learned from her family members also helped her overcome. She circles back to her HBCU experience when she reflects on her ability to overcome obstacles over the course of her adult life. As a young woman coming of age, her close-knit community, and her HBCU prepared her to succeed.
When I went to college I probably had about $200, so the first obstacle was ‘How are you gonna meet the financial challenge?’ I wasn't worried about them not accepting me. So, I stood in the line and when I got to the Director of Financial Aid he said, ‘You know you don't have enough.”, and I said ‘Well, my mother is working here, and my dad worked here.’ He said, ‘Who is your dad?’. I told him and he knew my dad, so he said ‘I tell you what. I’ll accept what you have, and if you maintain a certain grade point average, I will make sure that you have enough scholarship money to get your degree.’ I don't think that that is unlike many students’ stories from Historically Black Colleges. We don't necessarily come to college with a silver spoon in our mouths. You come with the notion that you have this aspiration. You have this vision, and you use your initiative to figure it out. I just feel like a Historically Black College and the Black community teach you to use all of the ways of knowing and being in order to serve your community well.

The realization that the HBCU experience equips students to navigate the complexities of life by helping them tap into a comprehensive sense of self is one that Elizabeth cherishes with pride. She has held fast to this personal truth since her undergraduate years. The lessons she learned about using initiative and multiple ways of knowing how to succeed, would become the context for mentorship in her interactions with young people throughout her long and storied career.

I asked Elizabeth about the relationships she developed as an undergraduate student that she believed contributed to her collegiate success. The ease with which she was able to refer to specific individuals by name, after the passing of so many years, spoke to the emphasis that Elizabeth places on relationship. The impressions that these individuals made on her and the lessons each person taught her, positive and negative, about leadership and about herself, are noteworthy. She recalled,

I had teachers, African American teachers like Dr. S.K. Maximillian, who had a significant impact on my life in terms of excellence. I had a teacher by the name of M.L. Simpson who didn't remember that she told me I couldn't go to college…that I shouldn't go to a four year college…that I should maybe first start at a community college, but when I finished my undergraduate program a semester ahead of schedule she said, ‘ I always knew you could do it.’…This brings to my mind that one has to be very careful when they're in education about what comes out of their mouth because you never know when your influence may carry the hearer on a different pathway, especially if they believe more in what you say than what they believe in their heart. I think if I had not had
the family that I had I could have ended up [very differently]. I don't know how she [M.L. Simpson] was defining me, but she couldn't define me the way my community or my family defined me.

Yvette Jackson (2011) explains that young people’s self-perception is greatly influenced by their experiences outside of school and by the beliefs, practices, and structures they are subjected to inside school. The strong sense of self that Elizabeth developed as a young girl proved to be both a springboard for the expectations of excellence communicated by Dr. Maximillian and a shield against the low expectations projected upon her by Ms. Simpson. The conviction that adults, and specifically educators, have a responsibility to choose their words carefully when speaking to and about students is a major factor in Elizabeth’s moral code. She shared a story about her early years of working with people with disabilities. She expressed that at this time people were often misdiagnosed because of societal and even industry ignorance. This period in her life is one that she refers to as “the beginning” of her desire to truly engage with and advocate for people who had been carelessly labeled. She expressed,

At one point, I would go to schools, and I would see up close this whole notion of disabilities. I learned that there were many types of disabilities and I also saw how because a lot of people, particularly Black people, didn't have the privilege of going to an institute and being properly diagnosed, as you know having a learning disability, they were often armchair and misdiagnosed as being hyperactive or having attention deficit disorder based nothing more than what some untrained individual with a little bit of influence was feelings at the moment. That was sort of the beginning.

The impact that others had on Elizabeth, whether positive or negative, manifests itself in the authentic ways that she chooses to engage people as a professional and as a person. She believes wholeheartedly that the words and actions of those assigned to educate should be used to empower, motivate, and uplift, in the same ways that her family and caring community members did for her. She exemplifies the notion responsible for the title of this study. Her belief
is that it is a requirement to return to the community that same care and support given to her by
caring adults and community members along her journey.

Elizabeth: Developing as a Professional

Elizabeth decided to attend graduate school, earning her masters and doctoral degrees.

When I asked her to elaborate on her decision to continue her education once it became
“optional” according to her family standards, she explained that she had spent several years
working for people in top leadership positions and she had many friends and associates who
were older than she was and who had advanced degrees. These individuals opened a world of
possibilities for advanced scholarship to Elizabeth and she followed her intuition. She
remembered,

A lot of my friends had returned to school as older adults. One particular friend Doctor
Josephine McClusky was a role model and a mentor and like a second mother to me. She
was an African American woman who took me under her wings, and she was working on
her doctorate at the time and then later she even went to law school…so I just always felt
that I wanted to be like the best of the people I was around. I was dating a young man
who was working on his doctorate then I had another friend who had a doctorate so I
thought ‘If they have one I should have one too,’ When I met my husband in the late
1970’s, on our first date he asked what my aspirations were. I told him to earn a doctorate
and to become head of Health and Human services cause I just I have always aspired to
be at the top of whatever I could be at not just for me but so that I could have a seat at the
table so others could have a seat.

In subsequent years, Elizabeth would apply this principle of “lifting as she climbs” to
each of her professional settings. She has been committed to making connections and opening
doors for others for the entirety of her career. As a Black First Lady, this character trait has
presented itself in an intuitive ability to connect people whose potential has been untapped and
have a desire to learn, with the people who have the willingness to provide opportunity, and a
desire to teach. When I asked about a typical day in Elizabeth’s life, as I imagined, her penchant
toward to connecting rang true. She chronicled,
My husband and I go to the gym together every morning. When we come back we have breakfast then I generally have a meeting with the person who just I was just talking to before this interview. She is a white woman who I met right after a Martin Luther King, Jr. training program. I think we met it 2000, discovered a like-mindedness, and we've been joined at the hips ever since. We work together for about 2 hours every day. I have board meetings I'm in several woman's club, I'm on a national Medical Association board with a group of Black medical doctors, so I got them together yesterday. I also have a regular one-on-one meeting with someone I mentor. Today it was a young lady who just completed medical school. I went through the four years with her as her mentor and at least once a month she calls. I'm connecting with people and connecting people all day.

The notion of preparing herself to take a seat at the table, and making room for others, was prompted in part by a feeling that her voice was at times ignored in the white male dominated professional spaces Elizabeth occupied. She developed a deep desire to change this. She started her career in the public health industry and then moved into assisting university chancellors and presidents in predominately white academic institutions. She recalled,

I remember being assistants to chancellors and presidents. I went from public health to assistants to chancellors and presidents at predominately white institutions, and I remember feeling a little bit insecure with the men around the table, who were mainly white men, because they all had doctorates and I felt like I didn't have the voice that I wanted to have when I had an opinion. I felt that sometimes my voice was not as impactful or as listened to in the way that it would be if I came into the room with a doctorate. I felt the doctorate had the influence…the respect. I just never wanted to feel left out of the conversation.

The feeling of warmth and welcome are recurring themes in Elizabeth’s narrative. The sense of belonging that she craved and enjoyed as a young person permeates the aura she has attempted to create for those around her since she the days when she was standing at the door of her Kindergarten classroom. Elizabeth was determined to become a force to be reckoned with in leadership circles. As her hospitable nature, combined with the determination to ‘sit at tables’, and to make her voice heard, proved to open pivotal doors for her, and she knew that, ultimately, the access she sought would come in the form of scholarship. She committed herself to earning the same advanced degrees that the chancellors and presidents she served held. She learned how
to listen carefully to the mission, vision and values of top-level executives and then used her initiative, intellect, and ambition to support them in successfully accomplishing their goals. This formula of listening carefully and using strengths as leverage to promote growth is the same formula Elizabeth applies to community uplift.

Candy

The desire to learn and excel academically is evident in Candy’s reflection on her life’s journey. The commitment to hard work, perseverance and honoring the teachings of her parents, permeates the critical phases of her life. Research Question 1, that seeks to understand the experiences that have contributed to the involvement of Black First Ladies in racial and community uplift, is illuminated in Candy’s narrative. She provides a clear picture of how her lived experiences inform her “why” where uplift is concerned.

Candy: Childhood and Adolescence

Candy currently lives in a growing southern city with a thriving Black community, flanked by three Historically Black Colleges, and she came of age in a small town in America’s Midwest. The seeds of excellence, academic and otherwise, were planted at Candy’s kitchen table. She attributes her work ethic and determination to Sunday morning conversations around the breakfast table with her father and sisters. She remembered,

Every Sunday morning, we had this tradition. We ate breakfast together before we went to church and my dad would say to each one, “What do you wanna be when you grow up?” I decided early on that I wanted to be a nurse while in kindergarten and so his thing was, every Sunday, when he asked what we wanted to be he said, “Work towards that.” Every Sunday, so it was just a given that I was gonna be a nurse. My oldest sister is the social worker. She’s retired. My sister underneath me is a teacher and my youngest sister is a lawyer.
Candy’s reflections on her academic achievement are deeply rooted in the high expectations of her parents for their daughters. When it came to grades, Candy understood completely that her parents demanded above-average performance. She laughed when she said, If you came home with something lower than a C it was bad…bad…bad. OK? So, you had no other option…no options…They would say, ‘You can at least make a C. Anybody can at least make a C.

When I asked her to reflect on her K-12 educational journey, Candy began her reflection in junior high school. She shared one story about an incident with her guidance counselor that appears to have shaped her professional trajectory and planted a seed that prompted her commitment to educational advocacy. Candy expressed always having a sense that she was going to go to college. Her self-awareness, coupled with the influence of her family, provided an unshakable understanding of and clarity around the academic track she needed to be on to get there. When she was confronted with what has been referred to in education circles as “the soft bigotry of low expectations”; in the advice of her school counselor, her inner fortitude allowed her to rise above. She shared, I remember junior high was that time you had to choose what your high school career was going to be…back then you had to go to your counselor, and they helped you decide what track you were going to take in high school. It was a poorly integrated school…my counselor asked me what I wanted to study, and I said I wanted to be a registered nurse, and she said, ‘Well I think maybe you could be a teacher or maybe a hairdresser or…’ and I was like ‘Well, no. I don't want to be those. I want to be a nurse and I need to take academic courses.’ I knew I had to have Latin and Chemistry and all those things. She says ‘Well, I don't think you can do it.’ Well, that's what I wanted to do, so that's what I did.

This middle school experience exemplifies Candy’s ability, at a relatively young age, to stand up for herself. The experience provides a glimpse into Candy’s belief that she could counter the soft bigotry that her counselor, and others, attempted to feed her with the internal resolve that she could, with preparation and hard work, do whatever she decided she wanted to
do. In a later discussion, we will see Candy advocating for the dreams and desires of school aged children. This commitment to standing in the gap for those who may not be aware of their own agency, is undoubtedly connected to her success advocating for herself as a student. She proved to herself, in the midst of her adolescence, that she had the power to stand, as the old folks say, ‘flat-footed’ in her own power and navigate her destiny. Without self-advocacy in that pivotal moment with her counselor, Candy might have had an extremely different future.

Research Question 1 asks about the experiences that have contributed to the involvement in racial and community uplift. Candy’s early experiences in her household, learning valuable lessons about the ability to chart one’s own course, combined with the testing of those lessons throughout her early schooling, provide insight into what prompts her to insert herself into the lives of others to enhance their quality of life.

Candy: College, Early Post-College, and Adulthood

Candy’s early experiences as a college student were heavily influenced by her identity as a young Black woman coming of age in the mid-western region of the United States during a time in our country’s history that was riddled with racial tension. Though she never lost sight of her desire to be a nurse or her commitment to excellence in scholarship, her developing identity and discovery of her voice, meant that the desire to advocate for herself, and her peers overshadowed academic performance, and resulted in a shift that would change the trajectory of her academic journey. When I asked Candy to discuss her undergraduate experience, the opening of her answer illustrated two things, 1) the notion that things do not always end the way that they begin, and 2) her identity as a Black woman, leader, and advocate was ‘welling and swelling’ in the way that Dr. Maya Angelou refers to the black ocean in the 9th stanza of the foundational poem, Still I Rise. Dr. Angelou writes, “I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
welling and swelling I bear in the tide.” The identity development that Candy was experiencing as an undergraduate moved metaphorically like the tide, ushering in the confidence and self-empowerment of her ancestors, and sweeping away the silence and inaction of her youth. Candy recounted,

I started out at an extension of [the flagship institution of the public and land-grant research university in my region of the Midwest]. Mom said ‘I want you to go to [the small liberal arts college nearby], but she said I could not live on campus. I had to stay at home, so I chose the extension of [the flagship school] and I got in. There was a lot of campus unrest. I got in this group called the Black Student Union. There were only a few African Americans on campus, and …I tell my grandkids now…that every day, at the end of our meetings we’d stand up and we’d all put our fists in the air and say, “I am somebody. I am Black. Yes. But I am somebody.” Through the windows in our meeting room, we’d see the white people coming by… just looking at us. We decided to integrate the lunchroom … the white people sat in one place and the black people sat over there [she waved her hand and frowned slightly, indicating that the area where black students sat was inferior to where white students sat], so we decided that we would go early before white people got there and sit in their seats, so they could be made to sit ‘over there’…made to sit there with us. So of course, that caused a big problem. We all got called to the Dean of Students’ office, and if you were having trouble in class, grade-wise, which I was as a freshman, you got suspended…I got suspended.

Experiences like this one spurred Candy’s desire to advocate for the uplift of others. The direct racism that was commonplace on Candy’s campus became problematic and then intolerable for her as she began to explore her racial identity and the complexities of being a Black female student on a predominately white college campus in the Midwestern region of the United States in the 1960s. This event is an experience that directly impacts why Candy chooses to involve herself in racial and community uplift. She understands firsthand that inequity can be directly addressed through organized, collective action. She also learned first-hand that taking a firm stand can lead significant consequence, and that consequence is sometimes worth the risk.

After her suspension, Candy returned home, still determined to become a nurse. The completion of her nursing degree would come almost years later, after getting married and while
expecting her first child. She recalled meeting her husband after she returned home, and the moment that she was pushed to pursue her desire to finish her degree.

We got married about four years [after we met] and we moved to a city in the South. He was working for the government, and I was just like staying home during the day in this apartment that had nothing in it... 'cause we had nothing ...nothing. So, I got a job. There were all these nuclear plants where we lived, and I went to this interview for a job in the mailroom, and the person interviewing me said, ‘I see you have some college classes in nursing’. I said “yes”, and he says ‘You don't need to work here. You need to go back to school. I'm not giving you this job. You need to go back to school and be a nurse.’ So I found the state school in the area where we lived. It was about an hour drive, so I drove down there. I met the Dean of the nursing school and [discovering where I lived], the first thing she said was , ‘Do you like the drive?’ I said ‘Well, I didn’t realize it was this far.’ She said, ‘Well anything worth having is hard to come by.’ I will never forget that answer. and I got into [that state school] and got my degree.

Candy took the words of the Dean to heart and used them as fuel, much like she did with the words of her middle school guidance counselor so many years before. Candy’s reflections on her life’s journey are filled with pivotal moments like those described above. Moments that involved meeting the right person, with the right wisdom and advice, at the right time, and using lessons learned to drive life enhancing choices. Her foray into the nursing profession was no different.

**Candy: Developing as a Professional**

I asked Candy to reflect on and share her experiences as a young black woman entering the nursing profession. I wondered whether being in this unique professional arena meant having to learn to navigate male dominated spaces, and if so, whether being a Black female, in particular, made the navigation more complex. Her response added an interesting layer to the intersectionality I anticipated. I had considered the possibility of discrimination based on gender and race and had not entertained the notion of antipathy based on regional origin. Candy remembered,
My first job was in a small city in the Midwest. I was one of only two Black nurses in the hospital, and everybody treated us really great. I had no problems, not really. When we moved to the county where we could afford a house, I worked at the local hospital and that's where the rub came in. They would call me ‘Yankee’ because I was not from the South. People in the nurses’ station would say, ‘Yankees come down here and think you can tell us what to do’. The doctors didn’t make it any better and some of it was just the way doctors treated nurses. Yeah, that was not a good experience. When we moved back to the city, and I worked in the local hospital there, I think there were two Black doctors on staff. They were nice and they knew that it was hard for us.

Candy acknowledged that some of the maltreatment she experienced (e.g., underestimation, dismissal, belittling) in the process of leadership development, was based on the intersection of gender and race. She feels strongly that the act of nursing and patient care often transcend race. She grounds this position in one of her most respected nursing theorists. Candy explained,

I think everybody has in their character do's and don'ts; things won’t do no matter what. I had had this class on nursing leadership, and we had to do a pick a nursing theorist to talk about and do a presentation on and I chose Madeleine Leininger. Her nursing theory is about care and what it means. I really liked her a lot. She came up with this theory of care …nursing is all about care and there are different ways that you care for people, there's the professional care and then there's the human element of care.

Candy explained that the human element of care, her approach to care, transcends race, gender, socioeconomic status, and regional origin. She provided multiple stories about how she circumvented potential barriers (i.e., White patients’ fear of receiving treatment from a Black nurse, White and Black male doctors reluctant to receive information from a Black female nurse), that might hinder her ability to provide quality health care by approaching every situation with the express focused of meeting basic needs. She moved past societal limits by treating every person as a valued and respected member of humanity.
Exploring Research Question 2

Seeing: Ourselves and Each Other

Many communities and sub-cultures have a unique collection of traits that are accepted as a way to help members of those communities recognize and acknowledge each other. It is a shared, well established, internally understood, principal among most members of the Black community that when one is in an environment where there are a limited number of Black people, the few are careful to look after, check on, and acknowledge one another. The tremendously popular situation comedy, Blackish, devoted an entire episode to “the nod”, a simple head tilt backwards that communicates that ‘you are seen, and you are not alone’, from one Black person to another, in a setting where he or she may be among the only Black people present. Each of the Black women in this study expressed an acknowledgement of the efforts and the value of other Black women. They each expressed ‘the nod’ toward the efforts of Black women who pour into and hold up the Black community as a whole.

The proverbial nod is often enlisted to validate the lived experience of Black people in American society, an experience often riddled with inequity. Each of the women in this study expressed a close familiarity with race and gender-based discrimination. Each woman recognized that she desired to have a voice and to have input in the events that shaped her life. Each leader expressed a shared desire to prove, through excellent and ethical performance, that Black women deserved to exist in whatever arena they chose to enter. Study participants referenced the absence of Black female role models in the professional spaces where they found themselves, prompting each to look within to summon the confidence that she belonged.
Claire: Exceeding Expectations

As reported earlier, Claire expressed a knowledge of herself as a leader, at home and at school, very early in her development. Her memories of leadership are squarely rooted in her identity as a Black child coming of age in a middle to upper middle class, predominately White environment. She noted,

I entered first grade at an elementary school in a very white suburb. The understanding was, ‘You’re a black child, a chocolate child, in a white environment [in the 60s]. You immediately have to be making your way in the world….”

This message of exceeding despite all [race-related] obstacles is common among members of the Black community and deeply reinforced when Black people find themselves few among a predominately white citizenry. My own family lore chronicles that my grandmother, a Black woman, raising two sons in the Midwest in the 1940’s, admonishing her boys with the mantra, “You have to be better than the white man’s best.” Many factors contributed to the safe and successful upbringing of my father and uncle, however, without question this counsel toward excellence resonated deeply within both of them. The notion of working harder and being best echoed sufficiently enough to produce one corporate and one civic leader, both of whom ascended to the top ranks of their fields of expertise. The notion that Claire knew as early as first grade that she needed to immediately ‘make her way in the world’ rings true to my own experience, and that of my extended Black community.

Elizabeth: True Good Will

Elizabeth leaned into the conversation around role models in the workplace. She noted that there were very few times in the professional setting that she was in the presence of an abundance of Black colleagues. When she did have the chance to interface with other Black professionals they used the rare opportunity to affirm one another.
The first time I was with a group of Black people, we talked about the challenges that we faced being alone… not really having mentors or people to sort of, show us the way… we had to figure it out. When I left there, I had to tell the [White] person that I was working for, the leader of that institution, ‘If you ever hire another Black person, don't mistreat them with your liberal kindness.’

Elizabeth’s message to her white colleague upon her exit, was targeted and deeply personal. Le Breton (2009) argues that often, in attempting to address systemic inequities, organizations adopt acts of ‘good will’ for members of historically marginalized groups (e.g., lowered expectations of excellence, exclusion from certain meetings and conversations so as not to overwhelm). These gesture of perceived good will often result in policies, programs and opinions that advance the very problems they were designed to alleviate (Le Breton, 2009). In that moment when Elizabeth addressed her white supervisor, she believed it was her duty to interrupt the destructive liberal consciousness that created the conditions of isolation, and confusion for Black employees.

Elizabeth’s strong sense of identity sustained her through the moments in the workplace where her talents were overlooked, and her strengths were underutilized under the guise of not pushing a Black woman too hard or expecting her to do too much. Her sense of self-worth as a Black woman prompted her to speak her truth to power on her own behalf, and in the spirit of uplifting the Black employees who would undoubtedly occupy the same spaces in the future.

As a graduate student at a predominately White institution, Elizabeth was discouraged from taking a full academic course load simply because she was Black and female. Her response was to reject the limitations placed upon her by the white males in leadership positions at the institution and do what she needed to do to demonstrate that she could handle whatever the course load required. Early in the admissions process, in an attempt to discourage her from participating, her advisor told her that she would not be accepted into her department of choice.
without the approval of the members of the department’s faculty. He explained that she would have to find, and convince, the faculty members to vouch for her academic potential and ability to commitment to the demands of the program. Without hesitation, Elizabeth moved intently and strategically to do exactly that. She reflected,

…he told me that they couldn't admit me because they just thought I couldn't handle a full load… but what they didn't realize is I was from [city of her youth]… a Black woman, who was and is a 'by any means necessary' kind of human being, so I went door to door…

Elizabeth was successful in securing faculty support. She was admitted to the program, and she matriculated with flying colors. Elizabeth shares the mindset that both Claire and Candy hold dear. Candy stated it best when she declared,

Sometimes, they don’t think we understand how the system works.

**Candy: Prompted By Policy**

Candy shared several instances where she inserted her leadership as she became aware of inconsistencies in policy. Whether in elementary or secondary school, undergraduate school, as a professional or as a parent, discrepancies in policy that manifested themselves in unfairness or inequity, have incited Candy to speak her truth to power.

At school age, Candy began to develop an awareness of race and socio-economic-related inequity. This awareness manifested itself in the form of personal goal setting. She was able to see, clearly, the existing inequities, between the lives of Black and white children and formed the mindset that she could have, do and become, anything she desired.

I always wanted to be, you know, like those white kids. Yeah, in high school, they had cars, and there was no way I wasn't going to have what they had."

When she was as an undergraduate student in the Midwest, Candy encountered defacto segregation, sanctioned by her university, and she decided to join with fellow Black students in a
protest to fight for integration. While her involvement came at a significant cost, Candy expressed no regret for her decision to act. She stated matter-of-factly, “We decided to integrate the lunchroom…I got kicked out.”

As a young health care supervisor, Candy was acutely familiar with the policies put in place to ensure quality patient care. When it became clear that her direct supervisor made a decision that would violate patient care policy and put Candy and her patients at risk, she acted swiftly and with confidence to ensure the safety of her patients and the integrity of her professional license. She recalled,

In a hospital where I once worked, there was an accountability system where nurses served each patient depending on the amount care the patient had to have. When I got to the hospital for my shift, we didn't have enough help. It wasn’t the first time. That day, we had 17 patients to care for. One patient was confused and would wander out of the room, no matter how many restraints we used. One male patient was in circular shaped bed that had to be rotated whenever he needed to get up. With a patient like that you need two people to turn the patient. That day it was just me and one other person there to take care of 17 patients. I called and I told my supervisor that I needed another person and she said, ‘Well ,we don't have anybody.’ I explained that I couldn’t accept taking responsibility for these 17 patients by myself, and she repeated, ‘There is no one else to call, so you have to do it.’ I knew, based on all the work of the nurses’ union, that we shouldn't be doing that, so that day I decided not to pick up that responsibility. I said. ‘I'm going home.’ I didn't take report. Taking report meant that the work of the outgoing going shift was done and they had given you the responsibility. Once you took report you were responsible for the patients. I went and clocked out and I got it all kinds of trouble.

Formidable social justice giant, Congressman John Lewis, coined the phrase “Good Trouble” to characterize the kind of risks one should take to advance the quality of life for others. He believed that there were necessary risks involved in the struggle for human rights. The trouble that Candy found herself in after refusing to be responsible for sub-standard patient care would undoubtedly fall into Congressman Lewis’ definition of good trouble. Candy recounted the trouble and her decision to hold firmly to her convictions. She remembered,

First they suspended me, then they wanted to take my license. They said what I did was negligence, leaving patients without care. I held on to my point 'cause the policy was that
the nurses who were giving me report couldn't leave until I took report, so that meant that they had to stay until somebody else took responsibility. They left me there. I just thought it was more dangerous for me this stay there and try to take care of 17 patients. I knew that was not right. I had to go to court. My union mediator said, ‘You're gonna be a part of your own defense. You go research what the nursing law is in this state regarding nurse patient ratio.’ I discovered there wasn't one. When we came to court I told the court what happened, and everybody decided in my favor. They had to expunge the incident from my record. I came back to work with full authority. It was a risk, and it was hard and it was really in the best interest of those patients.
I probed further and asked Candy if she was fearful during this demonstration of leadership. I wondered if she had any regret for holding so firmly to her beliefs or whether she second guessed her decision at any point during the series of events. Her honest response speaks volumes about her commitment to holding fast to her beliefs and to leading with integrity.

I thought a lot about what was gonna happen to me. I didn't imagine that they would try to take my license. I thought about the patients. If I stayed there and I didn’t have enough help and something happened to somebody, I would not forgive myself for taking on that responsibility when I knew I couldn't fulfill my duties.

I asked Candy what quality she felt she possessed inside of her that allowed her to take a stand in the face of such tremendous consequence. I wondered if she could explain the origin of the confidence she must have needed to take that stand on that day. Her answer provided a glimpse into her character and into the character of each of the Black First Lady in this study.
Candy responded,

So, I knew I would be encouraging a dangerous situation because there was no way I could justify professionally that I could do that job right or do it to the best of my ability. I have always had this notion to do well. I've always thought, and still think that I am going to do the best possible job in any situation. I'm always trying to do my best. That's always been my thing. I'm gonna do my best and I didn't think there was any way possible, even if I did my best, to take care of those patients.

Candy passed down the conviction to do one’s best to her children and her grandchildren. She shared the story that she empowers her daughters and granddaughter to excel by invoking the power of their last name. She reminds them in times of adversity that they are “Ridge women”, and that they “can accomplish anything with faith and hard work”.
All of her children attended the same academic magnet high school, known for its rigorous and challenging curriculum. When her children were students there, in addition to its notoriety as an academic powerhouse, the school also had a wide-reaching reputation for being bias and discriminatory against Black students. She shared a story about stepping in to advocate for her daughter, currently a mechanical engineer, who excelled in mathematics throughout her K-12 trajectory, when it was decided that she could not enroll in an advanced Calculus class. In fact, up to that point, the school had never enrolled a Black student in the calculus class her daughter wanted to take. Candy talked to the teacher who informed her that as head of the department, she did not believe that Candy’s daughter had the “necessary background” to be successful. Candy went to the principal and explained that she wanted her daughter to take the class. The principal then talked with the teacher and explained to Candy that the decision was final. Her daughter would not be taking the Calculus class and suggested that she wait until college to attempt such a demanding course. Candy remembered responding this way,

I said, ‘You answer to the board, right? We are going to the board on this. She's gonna take calculus right here, 'cause graduating from [name of academic high school] is a lot. She has had to and will continue to work for everything she’s got.’ My daughter got into Calculus, but my issue was thinking about the amount of kids, Black kids, that graduated from that high school and were not allowed to take Calculus, and their parents, working, educated parents didn't feel they could rock the boat. If the children can do the work, and somebody else is standing in their way, I'm gonna make it happen, and I'm not gonna allow the children to be stopped. She didn't expect me to think about the idea that she was not where the buck stopped. 'Cause sometimes they think that we don't know how the system works.

Candy’s policy-related advocacy spilled right into her role as a parent. The practice of a small number of narrow-minded adults deciding which students had the “necessary background” to be successful was bad practice that had quietly become policy. Candy’s daughter, by district standards, was positioned to take the advanced Calculus class. When this unwritten, unfair, and widely accepted practice positioned itself to hinder the innate mathematical ability of Candy’s
daughter, Candy stepped in on her daughter’s behalf and in doing so, on behalf of those children who had not been given the opportunity to do their best.

Williams (1987) refers to Black women as "strong-willed resisters" who, when insulted, steel themselves and proudly demand respect. Williams' (1987) reference to how the "irrepressible nature of Black women" pushes them to reject detrimental images was evidenced repeatedly in the data. Whether subtle and understated or bold and explicit, each woman expressed the will to persevere in the face of oppression. These Black female leaders have been perpetually determined not to let anything hold them back.

A Leader in Her Own Right

From its inception, this study sought to illuminate the lived experiences of Black First Ladies who actively participate in racial and community uplift in the spaces where their husbands, HBCU presidents, preside. The study set out to explore the notion of ‘leadership adjacent’, the ways that these ladies offer their leadership qualities and dispositions to their communities from platforms afforded to them by the professional assignments their husbands occupy. Research Question 2 asked about the strategies and practices that participants employ when they engage in racial and community uplift. Study data found, in each Black First Lady’s personal narrative, that while these women whole-heartedly supported her husbands, each one would engage in the uplift of others whether she was a presidential spouse or not. Each woman, a leader in her own right, explained how she utilized a specific set of practices to insert herself in the community and on the campus where her husband presides.

hooks (2003) documents that society has generally not expected Black women to contribute original thought or develop innovative programs, despite having continually proven their capacity to innovate and create. On the contrary, according to hooks (2003), society has
encouraged Black women to support their men's manhood, often at the risk of their own ambitions and desires. Indeed, the study data demonstrates that each woman at the center of this study has shown the capacity to lead, innovate, and create professionally, separate, and apart from her husband’s influence, while simultaneously supporting her spouse's vision and professional goals. This section of the findings will explore the data that relates to each woman’s development into her role as a leader in her own right. Here we find insight into Research Question 2, which sought to understand the strategies and practices these Black First Ladies employ when engaging in the uplift of others.

**Leading From Strength**

**Problem Solving, Connecting, and Service**

Research Question 2 asked, “What strategies and practices do Black First Ladies employ when engaging in racial and community uplift?, seeks to explore the ‘how’ of these leaders’ approaches to racial and community uplift.” Each participant shared stories about a seemingly automatic propensity to use her strengths to uplift the people in her sphere of influence by working to ensure that they are treated fairly and with dignity. Whether meeting a basic need, affirming the strengths and abilities of another person, or working to change unfair policies, these Black women, Claire, Elizabeth, and Candy, take it upon themselves to step in and offer the wisdom they have gathered through lived experience, to the world. Claire through her ability to guide others toward resolved conflict and consonance; Elizabeth through her desire to connect those in need to those with abundance; and Candy through her disposition to meet the basic physical and emotional needs of others.
Claire: Problem Solver and Mediator

Claire’s ability to stand on her own, intellectually, has served her well over the course of her academic and professional journeys. Over time, she has not only “stood on her own”, but she also has successful navigated an undergraduate Ivy League experience, a rigorous master’s program at a top medical institution, and earned a terminal degree in law. It is evident to this researcher that even if Claire had never met her husband or if he had never sought a university presidency, this Black woman, she would still be leading and lifting. In a discussion of her leadership contributions, leadership adjacent and utilizing the platform her husband’s presidency afforded her, Claire expressed,

I'm speaking to you from my office at the HBCU, where I serve as a senior executive and… I was an academic leader for seven years… in my 50s… that's what I have been doing and, that's where it's ironic. I was doing this for 25 years before my husband became a president.

Claire’s expressed clarity around the notion that she was leading and engaging on campuses and in communities before her husband stepped into the HBCU presidency, speaks to a deep personal understanding that while her husband’s position provides added visibility and opportunity to impact the quality of life for members of her community, her leadership is her own.

Claire inserts her strength as a facilitator and professional problem solver into the fortifying of relationships in her community. Like Elizabeth, Claire values making connections with and among people. She prides herself on being “findable” and has positioned herself to be exactly that. The office where she spends a significant amount of her personal is centrally located in her beloved city. Her reputation as a scholar, concerned citizen and skilled negotiator is widely known and well sought after by members of the community at large. Claire is confident in her abilities to support others in resolving conflict. The endorsement of her expertise by her
community, evidenced by the numerous and consistent honors, awards and acknowledgements bestowed upon her in a diverse range of community publications, speaks to her competence as a problem solver.

At times, Claire’s deep involvement in community uplift has been serendipitous, sparked simply by being in the right place at the right time. She recounted a public event she attended as a representative of the HBCU where she works. This meeting was coordinated to discuss the city take-over of a beloved community gathering space. The city is currently, and has been for the last several years, going through the growing pains of gentrification. Long-time residents find themselves battling to maintain spaces and places that they have called home for decades. Dramatic demographic changes have meant the displacement of beloved local structures and businesses. Four years before, a local fitness center was slated to be taken over by the city. It is important to note that this center, located in an historically African American community, opened in the late 1960’s and was an integral part of the turmoil and struggle of the local civil rights movement. The center has served as a convening space for neighbors and friends for more than 30 years. Claire spoke of the gathering space this way,

This location has been and is a cornerstone in our African American community. Not all of us are embraced by this city when we come here, but this place has been a place to go in the morning. You look to the right, and you see on the sofa the Black men sitting like they would be at the barbershop, you know? In July of 2017 there was quietly a movement to have the city take over the space. The problem was they did not go to the community…it was basically presented like 'Hey! Look what we're going to do. This is gonna be great!'…and it was horrible. I was there that night and I watched with my historic lens, cultural lens, professional lens, as this ‘s-show’ unfolded. A board member got up and basically, 'racist-ly' said, ‘You, Black people ought to be happy that this White man gave one million dollars to keep this open for the last few years.’ I mean you can go back and check the record, that is close to a verbatim quote. It went from there to a screeching halt.

Claire’s reaction to this incident was to begin thinking about how this confusion might be settled. She had no indication that she would be involved at a deep level in bringing resolution,
however, her interest in bringing clarity where there is confusion is instinctive and automatic. Claire knew that the absolute mismanagement of the delivery of the message, and the unmistakable arrogance in the tone and tenor would be difficult for the city to recover from. To say that many members of the Black community were offended is an understatement. As discussed earlier, Claire is a trained conflict resolution specialist. Her professional journey has provided her with a very specialized, proven, and respected set of conflict resolution skills. She strategically and intentionally uses these skills to lead differing and often contentious points of view to consensus to problem solve. Her problem-solving strengths and commitment to facilitating productive relationships among community members exemplify the ways that she engages in the uplift of others. Leaders in Claire’s community had called upon her multiple times, over the course of several years, to resolve a myriad of issues, many of them race based. Shortly after the failed community meeting discussed above, Claire was contacted by the owners of the facility and her problem-solving expertise was petitioned once again. She shared,

A representative of the organization that owns the community center contacted me shortly after that failed meeting to say that they had made a ‘terrible blunder’, and they reached out to my colleague and myself saying, ‘Hey you all just helped the city do that citywide dialogue on race. Do you think you could do something like this with this community? Can you help?’

This request provides evidence that Claire’s expertise as a problem solver and a connector are widely recognized. Claire and her colleague accepted the challenge, designed, and produced a series of community dialogues which ultimately maintained the integrity of the space for that the neighborhood so deeply loves, appreciates, and needs. Claire and her team worked with both local and national organizations to resolve the conflict and develop facilities and programs that will sustain the community for the foreseeable future. Reflecting on the process
from the chaotic meeting to the peaceful resolution, and her work with city officials in years past around race related issues, Claire shared with a balance of pride and grace:

The long story short is we designed and produced three community dialogues specifically around, 'What do we need to do?' I was able to present the organizations’ concerns. The community was able to present their concerns, and if you go from that winter to May of this year, we celebrated the groundbreaking of a six-million-dollar health center on the grounds of the space, sponsored by a major health-care coverage provider and powered by the HBCU Consortium that my university is leading and convening, and I was asked to be a part of the ceremony…and our work was named. We were talking about what we could do, and we came up with the ideas that keep the fitness center a hub for the community. All of the local HBCU’s are going to bring resources to the effort. The Mayor said, ‘Thank you.’, to me at that event because he remembered what happened back then. Many people don't.

These examples of strengths-based leadership occurred separate and apart from any association between these community leaders’ relationships with their husbands. The desire to serve neighbors, affirm others, and resolve conflict is inherent in the women who possess these gifts. The initiative to share their gifts with the world to uplift is a divine disposition that each woman has demonstrated she would have contributed whether married to a university president or not. These women exemplify the notion that it is the propensity of Black women to cathect on behalf of their communities.

**Elizabeth: Connector and Relationship Developer**

Elizabeth believes strongly in the power of connection. In his best-selling book, The Tipping Point, Malcolm Gladwell (2000) introduced the term “connector” to describe a person who knows a multitude of people and makes it his or her regular practice to introduce the people they know to other people. Elizabeth’s relationship-driven approach to life is demonstrated by her regular practice of bringing people together. Elizabeth was the oldest child of four, and at an early age, and as earlier noted, Elizabeth exhibited not only empathic tendencies that continued into her adult life, but also a willingness to insert herself into positions of leadership. She internalized her responsibilities as the oldest child (i.e., primary decision maker, expected to “handle things”), and extended them to everyone around her throughout her leadership journey. Elizabeth has a clear sense of her leadership strengths, and she takes great pride in one particular asset: the ability to connect people who have similar interests, skill sets and goals. When asked to describe this leadership disposition she said,
I’m a connector. I love showing people how they are connected to change the world for the better. There has not ever been a person that I’ve met that I could not connect. I think my husband has been in awe of how I’ve been able to make accurate judgements about people, and I think he’s come to rely on it. After about 5 minutes, I have a general sense about who I think a person is.

I am an ardent fan of Rhythm and Blues (R&B) music; a genre that lives at the foundation of my identity. R&B melodies, baselines, lyrics, and especially artists feed my soul. During the discussion of her keen ability to assess people, Elizabeth casually mentioned an affirmation she received from a dear friend she met when they were both undergraduate students in that small southern college town. This friend just happens to be one of the most celebrated R&B artists of our time. This dear friend and music legend told her, “Elizabeth, when you look at me, I know you are looking into my soul”.

My ability to remain focused on the purpose of our interview was definitely tested as she shared. It took all of me resolve not to dwell on her relationship with the artist and ask the myriad of questions forming in my head about all of his endearing qualities. Remembering the purpose of our meeting, I rose to the challenge, and asked her to share further about the power of connecting. She recounted a moment, as a rising corporate executive, when she insisted that a key leader in her organization accompanied her to meet a key leader in her community. Her community was one of her organization’s primary clients. She felt it was critical that this decision-maker see and experience, firsthand, making the genuine needs of the people in the community visible. She believed that having this context would lead to a stronger and more meaningful response the community’s condition. She shared,

I was able to take the person who was over the city health clinic into the community to meet with one of the most important community leaders in the city and visit the community clinic of a local church. I take credit for helping to get the doctors out of the hospital and into the community.
Elizabeth’s penchant for connecting people also diffused into her political convictions through a commitment to community organizing and political activism that started in her teenage years. Living in the southern region of the United States during her formative years, played a major role in her active involved in the battle against injustice.

When I was 16, I was a poll worker, registering people to vote, so I’ve always been a person who sought fairness and justice, whether it was in my home or in my workspace. I went from being a person slightly involved in politics to an employee who was asked to handle affirmative action, and in almost every job, to handle community relations issues and a lot of that is centered around justice."

I asked Elizabeth why she feels so strongly about establishing links among people and learned that identity and personal experience have played major roles in driving her to make connections. Elizabeth has experienced the pain of disconnection. She reflected,

As a president and presidential spouse there is a level of loneliness, there’s a loneliness that goes with this job. In this job there can be a lack of a sense of belonging, and I think maybe I crave not only to belong to a larger community but to have others understand that they belong.

Elizabeth’s was the only participant to articulate a sense of loneliness in association to her role as First Lady. No other study participant mentioned feeling lonely in this role, however, each intentionally found ways to move beyond being solely her husband’s wife, or simply the First Lady of the university. Each woman forged genuine and lasting relationships with members of their campus and local communities.

Elizabeth draws on the life lessons learned from her Southern upbringing. At an early age, she learned to treat others with care and respect, and to always remember where she came from. By letting these principles, and these strengths of character, govern her everyday living, she hopes to give others the space to do the same. Elizabeth’s support for others also manifests itself through her proclivity to affirm others. She strongly believes that it is her duty to acknowledge the inherent value and worth of every person. She believes that it is critical to
empower people with sense that they belong in the spaces where they find themselves, so that, should they choose to, they can ascend to whatever heights they aspire. Elizabeth recognizes that the social standing of a university president’s wife, and the luxuries the position can afford, can make some people feel uncomfortable and out of place. As she reflected on her desire to affirm and reassure others, she drew upon two prose that have made lasting impressions on her leadership, 1) the lyrics to a traditional gospel song, and 2) the wisdom of Dr. Maya Angelou. Elizabeth reflected:

I have always believed like that song, that if I could help somebody along the way my living will not be in vain, and I’d rather people remember less what I did for them, but more of the feeling. Maya Angelou said, people might forget what you say but they will never forget the way you made them feel. I want when people to leave the president's house or leave a conversation with me feeling uplifted and better. I want them to feel whole and that they can be themselves no matter where they were when they first came into my presence. When they enter the president’s house, many people feel that it is above them. One of the joys I have, being a president’s spouse, who has earned her own doctorate, is that I can give people permission to be themselves by engaging them in such a way that they know that no matter how many degrees I have, and no matter where I live I still see the humanity in each person.

A powerful concept raised in Elizabeth’s above reflection is the notion of belonging. Elizabeth is consistently trying to help others feel that they can be their authentic selves in her presence. She is perpetually looking for common ground with those around her despite potential differences (e.g., educational levels, social prestige, age).

Research Question 2 focuses on the strategies these Black First Ladies use to engage in the uplift of others. As demonstrated in Elizabeth’s lived experience, making human connections, building relationships and affirming are each robust forms of uplift. She has created a proverbial kit filled with social and emotional tools that heal and fortify those around her.
Candy: Servant and Advocate

Candy’s influence is often demonstrated through acts of service. She has often used her community influence to ensure that the most basic needs of her elderly community members are taken care of. It is important to note that Black women commonly, in the spirit of affirmation, address one another as “queen”. The Crown Act of 2019 documents that a preponderance of Black women consider their hair a metaphorical crown (Pitts, 2021). Whether what rests atop a Black queen’s head is purchased, braided-in, sewn-on, or grown from birth, a Black woman takes great pride in caring for and styling her hair. When life circumstances make it difficult for a Black woman to manicure her crown, it has the potential to cause great pain and significant anxiety. As a salient example, the children of Candy’s elderly friend and sister-queen decided to relocate their parents to an assisted living facility several miles from the familiar community where they had lived for several decades. The relocation meant that Candy’s sister-queen was no longer able to keep her regular appointments with her beloved hairstylist. Consequently, Candy inserted herself in the service of her friend. Soon, what started as a gesture, extended from one queen to another, to meet the basic need of caring for her crown, became a ritual that fulfilled the most basic of human needs; being seen, heard, and valued. Candy recalled,

A couple years ago, the kids of an elderly couple we know, put them in assisted living and took them out of their normal flow. We found that they had moved quite a distance from where we were. They no longer lived close to anybody that they knew, so we just started kind of going over to see them. We went out and we forced our way in to talk with them. Her major thing was she couldn't get her hair done. It was a really nice...facility and it’s mostly white, so they do have somebody that does hair, but they do hair very differently, very differently. She was not happy that she couldn't get her hair done and I said, ‘Well I could come and pick you up on Fridays and take you get your hair done and then take you back home.’ So that's what I do every other Friday. On Fridays, as we get to talking I learn about the other things they need. I’ve been picking up things that they eat...foods I know they like. I like to take them bread, banana bread, and pumpkin bread. They like soup, so that's what I do for them, 'cause I noticed over the years there just isn’t anyone to help them with things like that, so that's kind of my mode of operation. I try to see what people need and supply it.
Candy’s care for her friends provides an example of how she demonstrates uplift by paying attention to the basic needs of those around her and acting, to the best of her ability, to ensure that those needs are met. In a later reflection Candy shares a professional moment when she made a brave and difficult professional decision that caused her some personal anguish. I asked her whether she would advise another young nurse to take the same courageous stand. Her answer provided insight into another way that Candy demonstrates care. She empowers the leadership in others by reminding them of their ability to think, decide and act for themselves. Research Question 2 seeks to surface strategies that Black First Ladies utilize as they engage in uplift. Candy skillfully uses affirmation as a strategy. She reassures those that she uplifts by speaking directly to their identities as powerful and capable women. She shared,

I would never tell another woman to do or not do what I did, because these are very personal, professional decisions. Making difficult decisions comes from within yourself and from what you know about yourself. I would never tell anybody else ‘This is what you need to do.’ or, ‘Don’t do that.’, because the stakes are so high. It has to come from inside you. These are decisions a person has to make on their own. I would tell them, ‘It's about trusting what you know about yourself.’

As we have seen from Candy, at an early age, knowledge of self is a trait that she values and wields as a shield against potentially destructive forces. Extending this preservative artillery to leaders who have yet to encounter the obstacles she has already overcome is another method Candy uses to uplift. These enlightening vignettes speak directly to Research Question 2 in that they demonstrate Candy’s use of self-knowledge as a strategy for uplifting to others.

Candy’s consistent penchant for caring for others presented itself naturally and regularly in her role as First Lady. Candy spent a significant amount of time on the campus where her husband served as president. The time that she spent developing relationships with faculty, staff, and students inspired a powerful way for her to use her combined propensity for advocacy and her professional strength as a health care leader to support the campus community. Retirement
provided Candy the luxury of time she did not have while she was working. Upon retirement, she combined her love for the stakeholders, her commitment to serve and her professional skillset to uplift the community. She recalled,

I started, even while I was working…they didn't have the health ministry on campus. There was a sick unit and I just tried to help. After I retired, I decided I might as well do the health and wellness at least two days a week. It ended up being more than that. It was obvious to me that the education they were getting as far as the classes were concerned was adequate, but an important thing to me was that I don't think a person can be highly educated and not take care of their bodies."

Candy used advocacy and service strategically to uplift the physical and mental wellbeing of the campus and surrounding community. Each of the Black First Ladies at the center of this study, used the strengths and the gifts they have nurtured throughout the course of their lifetimes to advance the quality of life for the members of their communities and society in general.

**Family (Leadership) First**

One common finding among the Black First Ladies in this study is the emphasis on family. Each believes that nurturing and caring for their immediate families was the most important endeavor, more critical than any professional or civic duty, on the pathway to uplifting others. In the context of Research Question 2, these Black First Ladies model ways that the nurturing and preservation of one’s family can be a powerful strategy in the endeavor to uplift one’s community. The sense of fulfillment that each woman gains from the laser focus on her own family fuels the fortitude required to uplift others. Each woman’s role in her household manifests itself in a particular type of inner power that uplifts and edifies from within and emanates outward into her community.
Claire: Power of Example

The approach that Claire takes to uplift is rooted in placing her immediate family and its well-being at the center of her efforts. Claire’s strategy of placing her family first, is driven by a life journey that demands it. Claire formed her positions about a woman’s professional contributions to her household from her mother’s example at an early age. Her mother worked outside of the home during a time in U.S. history when most women did not. In the suburban neighborhood where Claire grew up, at the time she lived there, gender roles among most of the white families in her community were traditional. Husbands were the primary breadwinners, and wives stayed home to raise the children and maintain the residence. She remembers the gender roles in her household being very different, and that difference directly impacted her early leadership development. She stated,

It was countercultural, not for Black folk, but for the socio-economic neighborhood… environment which we were in. My mother was a working professional woman in a classic …think ‘1960s I Dream of Jeannie’ era… where the mothers would have been stay-at-home, so I had more responsibilities assisting a working mother, ‘caring for your brother’, getting dinner started before she came home and the doubling up of doing chores on the weekend with her because she was working during the day.

Claire lost her mother tragically at an early age. Her mother’s influence as a leader, trailblazer and influencer impacted every aspect of Clare’s life. Because of the loss of her mother, Claire was laser-focused on nurturing and developing a strong and intact Black family. This focus influenced every one of Claire’s major life decisions (e.g., college-going, the selection of course of study, whom to marry, direction of career path). The discussion of her motivation for, and devotion to orchestrating a healthy Black family, provided Claire the space to articulate her why. She reflected on the generational connection to her deep need to develop and perpetuate a strong family. She shared,
My daughter and I talk about this. We look back and we can name the matriarchs going back to about 1810, kind of when they start getting lost in the manifest of enslaved persons. The ones that we know that are named, and we know their stories. I often say, ‘I come from a long line and short-lived women.’ Most of the women in my line are gone by the time they’re 40, so it’s important I’m sitting up here at 63. What we figured out is my maternal grandmother was raised to be a concert pianist who didn't marry the Black doctor’s son. Instead, she ran away and married this other guy who was charming and poor, and she ends up dying in childbirth with her 8th pregnancy during the depression. What I’m talking about is she never got to do what she was destined to do. So now I have a daughter and I’m able to give my daughter violin lessons now and kind of keep that going. We talk about the ways in which, just in our own line, we complete the life. We start somewhere here and sometimes it takes 2, 3, 4 generations to finish up that thing that got started, but we complete the life.

Claire’s intent to transfer the rich dreams, hopes and destinies of her ancestors and nurture the same in her own children, has guided the ways that her leadership presents itself. Claire desires to leave a proverbial road map for future leaders. She tries to quietly apprentice the next generation of uplifters by sitting with them and sharing the lessons she has learned with them in hopes that they will share the lessons, not the name of the one who taught them, to the people that they need to uplift. The depth of Claire’s dedication to creating a strong family comes from an acute awareness that her life, the lives of her biological children, her spiritual children, and the generations of children to come, share the divine purpose of completing the lives of those who preceded them.

Elizabeth : Power of Light

One thing Elizabeth is sure of is that service to one’s family should come before any other kind of sacrifice. Elizabeth has served in many roles over the course of her life (i.e., Director, Special Assistant to university leaders, community organizer, wife, mother). She recognizes the ability of Black women to operate effectively in any position, and she sees the role Black women play in the household as the most important role of all. She asserted,

A Black woman’s role in the community where uplift is concerned starts with the role as nurturer, as leader, as the CEO in the home and then in the community as the person who
inspires who lifts up not only her children but her husband… the mother of is really the light, the light of hope the light of healing the light of faith the light of joy the light of inspiration the light of affirmation a light of continuation, that no matter what happens we continue on, we journey on. Women are also the light of being nonjudgmental, because we have to hold so many secrets in our hearts you know, not only personally but professionally…woman are the people who hold others together.

Elizabeth is not at all unsure about the value, worth and impact of women on the world in general, and she is especially clear about the invaluable role that women play in the creation of a stable and nurturing home environment. She recognizes the impact a woman’s support can have on the success and professional trajectory of her spouse and the health and wellbeing of her children. Elizabeth selected her metaphors careful when describing the contributions of a woman to her home. References to entities that command tremendous power and respect, like a CEO or light itself, further explain Elizabeth’s surety that service to her immediate family takes priority over service to anyone of anything else.

The findings support a primary awareness, developed early in life, that the nurturing and protection of one’s own family could positively influence the quality of life for Black community as a whole. A deep commitment to placing the needs of her immediate family and the atmosphere of her home above every other aspect of her multi-faceted life was consistent across subjects.

The data, as also earlier noted, supports that Elizabeth has been goal-oriented and ambitious since she was a child. Her commitment to her family heavily influenced the timeline of her academic and professional pursuits. She reflected in delaying the pursuit of her terminal degree to support her husband’s dreams and be fully present in the raising of their daughter, saying, “I earned my doctorate in 56. I went back to school 25 years after I told my husband I what I wanted to do. I put family first and didn't get [my doctorate] until later.”
The consistent thread of “family over everything” rings true for each Black First Lady.

Elizabeth’s academic and professional drive toward accomplishment and achievement was no match for her desire to provide a loving and stable home for her daughter, even if that desire meant putting earning her Ph.D. on the back burner for more than two decades.

**Candy: Power of Safety**

Candy’s prioritization of family manifested itself, as Elizabeth’s did, in creating a safe and warm environment in her household. During the early stages of Candy’s children’s development, Candy’s husband was well on the path to leadership both in the church and at the university level. Candy had already decided and declared that she would not entertain pressure to be any other kind of First Lady than she chose to be. Based on her experiences growing up, Candy chose to work with her husband to focus on the healthy development of their children above any other responsibility. Candy laughed as she reflected on her mother’s example.

I grew up with the notion that my parents cared, we were in a safe environment, and we were not hungry. I didn't always like what my mother cooked, but I remember being happy she was doing her best. I remember only being able to leave the table after you ate your food. We went to the doctor for regular visits and every fall we had to have Castor oil. I don't like oranges today because after the Castor oil, you had to eat an orange. Every morning after breakfast we had to take it. She believed it would clean out your lungs. We didn't question it and we were healthy, so I took it as she really cared about us, and she kept us safe.

When it came to her own approach to motherhood, Candy borrowed from the essence of her mother. She was determined to perpetuate the feelings of care and safety that had been the foundational text of her childhood. She did so by being present, and creating a space that felt like the loving and caring home she grew up in.

I have always been careful to keep the house neat, relatively neat as possible. I always made breakfast, lunch, and dinner to show my family that I cared for them. I did some work with the children's ministry 'cause my kids were there too, and I had some help from my husband.
Candy extended the lessons learned from her parents of care and safety and the commitments she made to her biological children to countless numbers of children in her community. When I asked her why she engaged in this kind of outreach she touched on the notion of legacy as she responded,

I think both my husband and I had parents that cared a lot about us, our parents made sure that we had the necessities and we liked our family lives and we thought everybody should have a good family life, so we had a foster child, at one point, along with our other kids and then we adopted two kids, so you know we just liked to see families and being a part of a family, and I always thought my goal with my kids was to make sure they contribute to the world as adults. Whatever they became, it was going to be a contribution to the world. So, we tried to expose them to everything that we could which meant I had to give them every kind of opportunity to be whatever they thought they wanted to be.

Candy used a nature-centered metaphor to illustrate how complex parenting can be and how sometimes, no matter the effort a parent makes to expose children to everything, to keep them safe and to show them care and love, the pace and direction of growth as well as the ultimate outcome is out of a parent’s control. She explained,

I think it's all in the way you support. So, it doesn't mean that just because all four of my kids got the same kind of environment and they were brought up a certain way, that they will all reach their potential at the same time. People have a right to be whoever they are and do whatever they want to do.

Candy recognizes her commitment to support her children in their development as key to their success as adults. She used a tree metaphor to explain that though the trees in her back yard look identical, and receive the same amounts of water and sunlight, they each grow, develop, and bear fruit in their own time. This realization to uplift by giving all that is possible and allowing individuals to glean the nutrients they need to flourish has propelled Candy serve deeply and consistently over the course of her lifetime. This strategy, for Candy, begins at home with those closest and then spreads far and wide to those in need.
Creating Legacy: Modeling, Bridge Building, and Liberating

The overarching theme of legacy undergirds the commitment to community displayed by these Black women. The idea that each is doing her part to create the kind of world she wants to leave for the generations to come is a powerful through line in each woman’s story. The third and final interview with each Black First Lady engaged them in a conversation about legacy and the ways that they would like to be remembered in the context of leadership and racial and community uplift. The actions taken by each woman to invest in her leadership legacy manifest as the evidence of the strategies and practices for uplift that Research Question 2 seeks. These actions demonstrate how each Black First Lady engages in racial and community uplift. Each response was unique and in true Black Queen fashion the ties that bind these ladies together were obvious, and compelling.

Claire: A Syllabus Somewhere

I asked Claire about the notion of legacy and how she might like to be remembered as it relates to her work in uplifting the community. She was very careful to explain that she defined her service to the community differently than “uplift”. A large part of what motivates Claire to serve and share her skills and talents with the community is rooted in a sense of cultural legacy, and where cultural legacy is concerned, Claire has a clear sense of how she would like to be remembered. She discussed her commitment to support the betterment of the Black community as obligatory reaching out to others rather than lifting others up. Her sense of responsibility to intercede on the behalf of the quality of life for African American people is deeply rooted in what she sees as a requirement for reaping the benefits of the accomplishments and successes of those who came before her. She stated,

The whole negro race enters with me, so for me is not an uplifting so much as we've got to breakthrough… get to a place that is safe and free and good and hold on, and we all do
that together, and I do that because it was done for me, you know. It is just a natural part of our reasonable service. I think there is also a quote from Maya Angelou that says basically, ‘we owe rent for the space we take up and the air we breathe.’

Claire holds a conviction that her actions are performed with the community and not for or to the community. This notion of getting with people serves as an auto-enacted strategy that endears Claire to those that she encounters, and bolsters trust relationships within her community. This She aligns herself strongly with Dr. Angelou’s quote, in that she believes that her service, in any capacity, is her divine assignment, entrusted to her based on the benefits she has enjoyed because of the sacrifices of the ancestors.

Claire reflects on her victories in community engagement, as illustrations of what she hopes her cultural legacy will be. She desires to leave a type of advocacy road map for the leaders that follow. She does not want for her name to be what people remember. She wants people to remember that she shared a blueprint abound with lessons learned and a set of specialized skills for future activists and world changers to step in to and offer. She reflected,

In terms of legacy, I was in the mix doing that thing, but the enduring lesson of this is there’s a syllabus in it. I learned that model of dialogue when I went to my first professional conference after I received a master’s in conflict management. I studied the theoretical model, we took it and applied it and trained 200 volunteers to help make those circles go, so there was pedagogy going on there. I want part of my legacy to be driving a stake through the heart of the culture of personalities. Action and responsibility are absolutely vital, but that's not what's to be celebrated. I don't want people to remember that I did that thing. I want people to remember there's a PowerPoint syllabus out there somewhere where we can pull some folk together and figure out what three critical questions we're going to ask in a dialogue circle to help heal this rift in this community that’s happening right now…there's a thing we can do…circle up.’ If it's that thing, and nobody remembers where that thing came from, but the thing lives, that's the legacy.

Claire is not interested in being remembered as the person who accomplished the remarkable thing that saves the day. She does not see her actions as uplift. Rather, she sees her leadership as an extension of herself that propels her toward a larger purpose. She would like to be remembered as the person who taught the people how to do remarkable things to save the day
for themselves. Her desired cultural legacy is that she leaves a recipe for success in place so that those who lead, mediate, and problem solve after her have something to draw from if they are called upon to facilitate difficult conversations, or bring diverse groups together to listen and truly hear one another in hopes of resolving community conflict. Whatever the need that arises, Claire does not want the next group of community leaders to have to figure everything out from scratch.

**Elizabeth: Human Connection**

Elizabeth’s response to the question about legacy immediately prompted her to think about social justice and the race-related issues currently confronting our nation, and the world. She reflected on the state of our society, what she believes has caused us to be in the state we are in, what we need to do collectively and some of her experiences as a connector as she considered the notion of her legacy. She shared,

> When I think about legacy, I think about affirmative action and social justice. More than ever before we’re on the brink of a new level of understanding between races. These deaths and these abuses like George Floyd… all of the murders have created a new awakening. We are connecting to some of the misfortunes of being disconnected. We have to get closer and in alignment with the humanity in all of us through the things we have in common. Dwelling on the things we have that are different does not work. If we can stop deciding who is “not as good as” because of where they live but look at from whence we’ve all come, and how far we can go together, then I think that we will leave this world a better place for our children and future generations. One of the ways we can do this and one of the best practices is to listen, guide, take each other’s hands to find a level of understanding and engagement. I hope to create a heightened sense of awareness that we’re all in this together by staying focused on hope and healing, and reminding folks that we are only on this Earth for about a minute and a half. I think it is the duty and responsibility of those of us who have been privileged to hold space in a classroom to connect people intergenerationally and cross culturally. We have to hold the hope and the faith that we can help to make the world and our communities better for us all.

It comes as no surprise that Elizabeth tied the notion of legacy together with the spaces where she feels change is best effected, in the classroom and at the table. My memory serves to substantiate that many a complex problem has been solved in my own Black family around the
table, through safe and edifying discourse, over a delicious meal. Elizabeth’s strategy of connecting people as they occupy the warm and safe spaces of her home is an example of how she engages in racial and community uplift. Elizabeth’s educational experiences taught her that the words and actions of educators hold tremendous power. She learned through experience that teachers can deeply encourage or permanently discourage the wills of their students. As she continued to reflect on legacy, she expressed how experiences around her own dining room table have served to bring diverse groups of people together and foster human connection. She reflected,

Being a connector has helped me to see people that were Republican, Democrat, Independent in such a joyful, cleaner light of hope and healing. I’ve learned that there are many stories to a person's life. When you only address them based on their title and not their truth then you don't really understand them. The only way you do that sometimes is to ask them to tell you a story about something about them…like their middle name. That's my icebreaker around the table. I’ll say, ‘Tell me your middle name, and tell me the story around it.’. There are so many different stories, and they always lead somewhere, and just that one icebreaker connects people to one another for the betterment of the community.

Elizabeth’s response crosses Research Questions in that she discussed both experience and strategy. The commitment to connect people is embedded into the rhythm of her daily life. We will learn in the next section that Elizabeth lives and breathes connection. The notion that connection comes to mind when she thinks about her legacy is consistent with the narrative of her life. Elizabeth had been a First Lady for almost 20 years at the time of our interview. I asked Elizabeth to expand on the idea of connection specifically as it relates to the way she connects with other Black First Ladies by asking her what advice she give to someone new to that role. She encouraged,

Do it with kindness and not with force or heavy handedness. You do it by modeling those things that connect people and bring people to the table who might not have ever thought that they would be welcomed into a president's residence and make them feel as much a part of that experience as the person who might be sitting next to them with a doctorate.
degree, because with your title of First Lady you can do that, you can actually set a table of unity, versus one of distinction.

Elizabeth is actively working to create a sense of belongingness. The idea that she is acting to make other feel that they belong serves as an example of a practice she regularly engages in to uplift others, which speaks directly to information sought in Research Question 2. The metaphor of the table is consistent in Elizabeth’s narrative. The table representing the place where people meet, share, and are fed, physically and spiritually. Her message of welcome and unity are recurring themes in Elizabeth’s life and are demonstrated in the way that she operates in the role of Black First Lady.

Candy: Authenticity and Affirmation

Reflecting on her legacy and how she would like to be remembered, as it relates to leadership and the uplift of others, gave Candy an opportunity to think about her commitment to advocating for others and her profound ability to remind others of their own self-worth. This reflective process surfaced multiple facets of her lived experience. She considered several entry points to her legacy story. Each point provided a piece to a puzzle that, once completed, displayed the image of a woman who holds herself, and those fortunate enough to cross her path, to a realistic and extremely high standard of integrity. Her first reflection related to the notion of what it means to accept the title of First Lady and continue to live an authentic life. She shared,

I hope that people will remember me as a person who was honest about who she is and who did not take on the character or the identity of other people because that's what was expected. I was true. I'm not saying I'm 100% perfect. I'm not saying I'm perfect in any way, but I hope they remember that I was who I was. There is not a specific thing that you have to do, or be like, or dress like, or act like. These titles don't deserve to dictate who you are. I get the indication that I'm not in the norm and that is perfectly fine. If other people don't understand, that’s their problem to deal with.

Later in this chapter, the data will expand on the liberating power Candy and the fellow Black First Ladies who participated in this study glean from simply and unapologetically
accepting and being themselves as part of the process of engaging in uplift. This self-acceptance is part of the process of engaging in racial and community uplift. Candy places significant value on navigating the role of First Lady, on campus as the wife of an HBCU president, and in church as the wife of a minister, on her own terms. For Candy, the notion of being true to herself, which the study shows evidence of this belief at an early age, has permeated every aspect and every phase of her life.

Advocacy also emerged as a weighty piece of Candy’s legacy puzzle. Candy is motivated by ensuring equity and access for children. Over the course of her lifetime, Candy has championed many causes and supported many movements, but none has meant as much to her as standing in the gap for children. As she thought about what she hopes the children in her life remember about her most it is that she was in their corner, providing the support and affirmation necessary for them to soar. She said,

Our children are the most important thing that we can put all our support into, because if we're going to change the way the world, or the community is, it starts with them. I've learned it’s kinda hard to change an older person. The most important thing we can do is provide experiences that expose children to different things. We can make sure that they are aware of how far they can go and let them know that we are going to be their major cheerleaders.

Candy’s motivation to ensure equity and access for children is used strategically to thwart existing structures that might accidentally or intentionally hinder children. Research Question 2 seeks to gain an understanding of the strategies and practices that these Black First Ladies employ as they engage in racial and community uplift, and Candy’s constant motivation to identify and interrupt cycles of inequity is a profoundly constructive practice.

As Candy discussed the children in her life, her grandchildren were at the forefront of this segment of her legacy reflection. She shared that since her grandchildren were young, she has been empowering with the significance of their family name. She encourages them by reminding
them that they are “Ridge woman,” and that Ridge women change the world. At a certain point during her reflection, she affirmed me in my pursuit of my terminal degree, by making me an honorary Ridge woman, and she enthusiastically expanded on and explained what the rich legacy of her family name means to her. She encouraged,

You can be a Ridge woman. We are women that are looking to change the world. My granddaughter’s last name is Jackson. When my other granddaughter was younger (she's 20 years old now) she asked if we could change her cousin’s last name to Ridge, so she could be a “Ridge woman” and change the world. When I look at my granddaughters, they truly are change makers. They are! The 20-year-old is in college, and she has three majors. She's all in. I think she is gonna be the first Black, female president. My other granddaughter is a ballerina and she told me this past summer that she's going to go to law school. OK. So, I’ve got her as the Secretary of State, and we’ve instilled this in them since they were little people…so they believe.

The legacy of the identity affirming conversations around the kitchen table that Candy and her sisters enjoyed as young girls about what they wanted to do, and be when they grew up, was passed to the next two generations of Ridge women. This discussion-based strategy for uplift is deeply rooted in Candy’s family lore. The messages of possibility, aspiration and accomplishment live on in her granddaughters and will undoubtedly live on in generations of Ridge women to come.

**Individual Sense of Identity and Self Worth: Realness**

One of the ways that Research Question 2’s emphasis on the ways that these Black First Ladies engage in racial and community uplift is illuminated in the value that each of these women places on what many in the Black community refer to as “keeping it real.” The Center for Applied Cultural Studies has identified nine themes that permeate the lives of African and African American people (Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement, 1999). When these themes are recognized and appreciated, bridges are built between and among African people and those with whom they interact. The cultural theme labeled Realness helps to
illuminate the way that these Black First Ladies engage with their communities. Realness is explained as the need to live life the way it is, without pretense. Each Black First Lady reflected on a moment where discerning or ensuring the need to convey Realness was present and clear in her navigation of the world. Each woman’s reflection indicated a strong sense of clarity around her identity and sense of self-worth as an individual.

**Claire: Decolonization of Our Experiences**

Claire exudes realness when it comes to discussing the power of the nomadic history of Black people in this country. She uses that history to emphasize the foundational importance of human and cultural connection, that Nelson Mandela has referred to as “the power of the collective” (Freebairn, 2016). She operates from the position that when Black women acknowledge one another and advance each other’s good work the force that is amassed is unstoppable. This particular kind of allyship is a strategy that Claire operationalizes habitually.

She told a story about an encounter she had with another First Lady at the HBCU presidential inauguration of that First Lady’s husband. Claire’s reflection exemplifies her commitment to enacting the strategy of acknowledging and advancing the good works of others. She remembered,

So, I’m attending this inauguration… our path crossed starting in the Rotunda of the states capitol where she was giving her First Lady remarks. I was there because I’m the daughter of two proud HBCU graduates, one who was still living and just attended his 60th homecoming. In that parade of events, I met this First Lady and attended and engaged in every one of her events, and all of the talks. That event happened 12 years ago in the middle of the country and now both she and I are here in the South in similar roles at different institutions, and all of those threads that tied us together then and tie us together now are who we are as a people. That’s part of our legacy. We are diasporic people and in all of our movement we have figured out how to find each other. Our native brothers call this Turtle Island and even though we don’t know where our African homeland is necessarily, we have planted our flags in all parts of this is country. It doesn’t matter, somehow we know how to still be a Black community, together …yes…and we just keep coming back together.
This reflection ties strongly to Claire’s strategy of being “findable”. She is, at all times, positioning herself so that those who want to engage in good work, in the advancement of the collective, can find her, and glean from her lessons learned and her lived experience. Destiny is responsible for the initial introduction between Claire and the Black First Lady she mentioned in the above reflection. It is also divine that 12 years later they ended up living in the same Black community. Strategy made it possible for the two of them to work shoulder to shoulder in collaboration on projects designed to encourage and strengthen young Black leaders within their spheres of influence.

Claire believes in storytelling, and specifically, in telling the stories of the histories of Black people and even more specifically, capturing and sharing the stories of Black women. She speaks of the critical need to elicit and record these stories for the sake of deepening the awareness of our shared experiences and for leaving a road map for the generations to come. She offered,

I am grateful that you are taking this opportunity of scholarship to tell this story right. As you have been this story and continue to be the story. You are giving us the opportunity to let us decolonize the Academy in a way that we not only get to tell the story, but we get to tell the story in our own language. I’m on this sort of Toni Morrison tip. She was very clear at some point she was not writing to or for white people, yeah, she was writing for her community. I feel like you’re doing this for us. Thank you.

Claire’s mention of decolonizing the Academy resonates deeply in the context of this study. Educational systems in this country have a history deeply rooted in ethnocide. The lore of boarding schools for Indigenous children that criminalized native languages, customs, and rituals, fueled by the sentiment, “Kill the Indian to save the man” represents a blemish on American history existing as a direct result of the colonization of Indigenous people. (Altaha & Kraus, 2012). This same criminalization of the customs, rituals, and languages of African and African American people, also the direct result of colonization, is well documented, and is the
rationale for the very existence of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The silencing and dismissal of Black women’s voices in higher education is not lost on Claire, who exudes the fierce urgency of now as she so eloquently expresses the force unleashed when Black women tell their own stories.

**Elizabeth: Evolution of Our Identities**

When I began the recording for Elizabeth’s first interview, as is customary, pressed record, welcomed her to the interview and then stated her name, ‘Elizabeth Rose’. Elizabeth politely and respectfully stopped me and inserted, “Please include my maiden name, ‘Stone.’ Since you want to go way back, we should start at the beginning, when I was Elizabeth Stone.”. It was clear to me in that moment that Elizabeth’s identity as a wife, mother, First Lady, community leader and uplifter, was formed very early in her development, and that it was important to her that I was aware of that in my endeavor to understand her experiences and her methods of engaging in racial and community uplift.

Elizabeth, who has been a First Lady for 16 years, shared that she has experienced times when people did not believe her openness was genuine. She attributed that mistrust to the misconceptions people often carry, related to class and social standing. Often those in positions of perceived privilege carry themselves as if they are exceptional, making themselves unapproachable and seemingly disconnected from the community. She shared,

The challenge is that sometimes people don't believe I'm that real because most people, many people in the First Lady or presidential spouse position, leave the house looking a certain way, acting a certain way. Well, I might walk out with pin curls in my head or wearing a baseball cap if I need to. When I was a new presidential spouse, I’m not sure that I was this comfortable; I’ve been at this 16 years. Back then, I might not have been as secure as I am becoming, and I try to support others when insecurities raise their heads.
In the reflection above, Elizabeth provides an example of how she taps into experienced-based mentorship. Over the course of her 16 years in this unique role, Elizabeth has faced a myriad of expectations, some realistic and some not, from a wide range of stakeholders. Michelle Obama, in her bestselling memoir, Becoming, exemplifies the challenges associated with being wedged into a role that is primarily defined by the man she chose to marry. On her First Lady journey, Elizabeth actively sought to become a woman comfortable in her own skin and free in her own choices. She has learned to present herself to the world around her in the ways that she chooses to in any given moment. This ease of self-acceptance serves as an example of the kind of emancipatory strategy sought in Research Question 2. Elizabeth shines her light on others, and in doing so, gives them permission to do the same.

**Candy: Declaration of Our Authenticity**

Candy also spoke about the value of being real, or true to herself in her role as First Lady and in her unique position of minister’s wife. Candy talked about a commitment she made to herself and to her husband early in their marriage once she learned of his professional aspirations.

I'm pretty much a laid back a person so I don't like dressing up particularly, and I don't wear hats and some people, including my mom, thought I should wear them. I'm not interested in dressing up...I really love jeans, and when my husband was pastoring, some of my friends that were members of our church teased him. I maintained my position. I wear what I want, I don’t gossip. I don’t participate in gossip, and I don't hang out and my thought process is, ‘I made this deal with my husband that when he decided to pastor and again when he decided to take the presidency,’ I said, ‘I'm gonna go along with that. That's my role, and whatever I decide to do, it's just gonna be because I decide to do it and not because it's an expectation.

Candy’s promise to her husband and ultimately to herself resonates as an example of her strong commitment to authenticity. She understood who she was and was clear about her priorities long before her husband’s aspirations for leadership manifested themselves. The stand
she demonstrated about the way she would enter the role of First Lady is a strategy she used to be true to her conviction to be real and honest about herself, to herself and to the community at large.

The pressure that Black First Ladies feel to present (e.g., look, dress, act a certain way) is palpable. As First Lady of an HBCU, and the wife of a minister, Candy has a double dose of this unique kind of social pressure. The intersectionality of being Black and female intensified the layers of intensity and scrutiny associated with her standing in her community. Her promise to herself and the declaration to her husband that she would present herself authentically in the spaces she enters is a strategy she uses to uplift others and to edify the most influential person in her world: herself.

**Chapter Summary**

The stories of these dynamic, Black First Ladies shared in this chapter reveal several common themes that run through each woman’s life. The findings reveal that each woman exhibits leadership characteristics that she self-identified at a very early age. Each woman experienced the intersectionality of being Black and female, as she faced challenges and obstacles specifically based on her race and gender. Additionally, each Black First Lady was able to overcome obstacles by leaning on lessons learned during the early, collegiate, and professional stages of her life. Each woman shared how much influence her family had on her early leadership development. Life lessons taught, directly or indirectly, by parents, siblings, and extended family members empowered each woman to persevere in the face of intense and often discriminatory circumstances. Each woman prioritized creating a stable home environment and a healthy family as she pursued her professional interests, and each woman demonstrated that she would have engaged in either the uplift of, or the reaching out to others, even if she had not
married an HBCU president. The sense of confidence and competence that rushes through the narratives of these Black First Ladies flows like living water with the potential to nourish and satisfy a generation of leaders fortunate enough to be washed over with their wisdom.

The data presented in this chapter, supports Research Question 1, that seeks to understand why these women insert themselves into the racial and community uplift of other, and Research Question 2, that attempts to surface how these Black First Ladies engage in the uplift of others. The overflowing evidence in the stories of these remarkable women demonstrates that in the face of being overlooked, underestimated, and discounted, Black women have managed to decode and effectively navigate systems that were never designed for their benefit. The narratives presented here exhibit that not only do Black women understand these systems, they master, improve upon, and expand the systems to make it possible for the leaders who walk in their footsteps to step in and offer.

**CHAPTER V: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The previous chapter introduced three key findings from this narrative inquiry, which sought to examine how/why (add overarching question here) The data surfaced that 1) Each Black First Lady demonstrated a quest for knowledge and a commitment to academic achievement; 2) Each Black First Lady had a clear sense of the story she would like her life to tell about the impact she had on the people and places she occupied; and 3) Each Black First Lady expressed knowledge of herself as a leader both professionally and personally. Throughout the previous chapter, participants shared personal narratives that recounted their courses toward becoming a Black First Lady (i.e., Leader Adjacent) who inserts herself on the campus and out in the community where her husband is a university president, with the express purpose of uplifting others. The idea that each is doing her part to create the kind of world she wants to live in and the
world that she wants to leave for future generations is a powerful through-line in each woman’s story. The women in this study give voice to Terrelonge's (1998) premise that Black women possess a fortitude, inner-wisdom, and sheer ability to survive that sustained them and their communities through enduring abuses (Hunter & Sellers, 1998). With each reflection, I gained a deeper understanding of these complex and often discounted members of society. From each first-hand account, I gathered insight into the experiences that have moved these leaders to involve themselves in racial and community uplift, and into the various methods they employ in the process. Listening to the personal stories of these women allowed me to glean insight into their perceptions of their complex identities as Black women, mothers, wives, employees, colleagues, mentors, community leaders, and First Ladies. Johnson and Arbona (2006) document the critical need for cultural legacy and connect race-related stress to a lack of cultural legacy (Johnson & Arbona, 2006). Each woman explored in detail, her contributions to her community, examined her own approach to leadership, and contemplated the legacy she would like to gift future generations.

Above all, this study attempted to surface the experiences that Black women who are married to HBCU presidents share that prompt them to insert themselves into racial and community uplift from platforms they did not actively seek. As a reminder, the work of Patricia Collins (2006) identifies Black women’s knowledge about the driving forces of intersecting oppressions, and their deeply held wisdom to navigate these oppressions, as essential for their survival (Collins, 2006, p. 275). The intent of this study was to center the knowledge and wisdom of these three women in a discussion of racial and community uplift. Specifically, I sought to learn about each woman’s lived experiences and the strategies and practices each employed to engage in the uplift of others in their own words.
This final chapter presents the discussions and implications of this narrative inquiry. The discussions are based on the Research Questions that undergirded the purpose of this study, which aimed at understanding the experiences of three Black First Ladies that might inform why they choose to use the platforms afforded to them by the positions their husbands occupy as HBCU presidents, platforms that they did not actively seek, to engage in the uplift of others. To achieve these purposes, this study asked two research questions:

1. What experiences have contributed to the involvement of these women in racial and community uplift?

2. What strategies and practices do these women employ when engaging in racial and community uplift?

The data in this study also substantiates the unique realities and remarkable commonalities existing within the narratives of these three multi-faceted women. These women hailed from different regions of the country, had distinct upbringings, attended divergent institutions of higher learning, and embraced vastly different professional aspirations, yet as these Black First Ladies narrated the stories of their lives, certain themes related to their leadership emerged: (a) they led from strength, (b) put family (leadership) first, (c) strong sense of identity and self-worth, and (d) seeing themselves and others. The data that emerged from their narratives also provides exemplars of strategies and practices these women use to enliven racial and community uplift.

To note, as a Black woman researcher, formerly married to an HBCU president, I interpret and discuss the findings of this study by using my familiarity with three cultural and social contexts: 1) the Black community, 2) the HBCU community, and 3) the experiential sphere of being a Black First Lady. I rely on my own familiarity, in addition to the relevant
theoretical frameworks (e.g., Black Feminist Epistemology and particular tenets of Critical Race Theory), because no prior studies exist on this topic. Overall, the findings of this study illuminate the participants’ understandings of their roles and responsibilities as a First Lady in using the platform afforded them to uplift members of their race and community. Claire, Elizabeth, and Candy elaborated on specific experiences that contributed to their involvement in racial and community uplift, and on particular methods of engaging in elevating the quality of life for her fellow community members and her rationale for adopting the particular strategy. Central to the research findings, participant narratives also shed light on the ways that these Black First Ladies developed an understanding of their identities as leaders. Each woman demonstrated leadership behaviors at an early stage that continued to manifest in distinct and impactful ways throughout the various phases of her life. In this section, I will discuss my key findings, explore emergent themes around leadership; and, finally, I will offer implications for research, implications for theory and implications for PK-12 practice.

**Summary and Discussion of Key Findings**

The findings of this narrative inquiry demonstrated that study participants’ engagement in racial and community uplift was grounded in their understandings of themselves as leaders. This self-awareness influenced how they engaged on the campuses and in the communities where their husbands presided. Each of these Black women relied on innate skill sets, such as mediation and problem solving, building bridges among people, and advocating and affirming people, nurtured over the course of a lifetime, to invest in the uplift of others. The key findings of this narrative inquiry are as follows:

1. Each woman expressed an innate desire to excel academically and develop intellectually that was nurtured by a particular group of individuals who
surrounded them (e.g., parents, immediate and extended family members, teachers).

2. Each Black First Lady expressed a desire to create a legacy which might serve as a guide for future leaders.

3. All three participants communicated a deep knowledge of self and a clear sense of identity, which included a non-negotiable prioritization of family above all else.

Across the findings, I discovered a collective drive for excellence among study participants and a clear understanding that each of the Black First Ladies at the center of this study is a leader who displayed leadership qualities early in her development. The data indicate that while each woman does in fact maximize the platform afforded to her by the professional standing of the person she married, the innate disposition of each of Black First Lady ensures that she would likely engage in uplift whether or not she was married to her husband. Jean-Marie (2006) proposed that, despite them being denied the necessary sets of tools (e.g., economic, legal, social) to navigate American society effectively, Black women have always accepted the responsibility of ensuring that their fellow community members had the tools necessary to succeed (Jean-Marie, 2006). This study provides evidence that might inform this historical commitment of Black women to cathect on behalf of their people. I next discuss my findings in the context of my research questions and situate them in the existing literature. I also provide recommendations for PK-12 based on the emerging data from this study. Following that, I summarize the data emerging from this study in relation to Black Feminist Epistemology and relevant tenets of Critical Race Theory.
**Implications for Research**

The findings of this study have significant implications for future research. As a reminder, the data surfaced that each Black First Lady 1) demonstrated a quest for knowledge and a commitment to academic achievement; 2) had a clear sense of the story she would like her life to tell about the impact she had on the people and places she occupied; and 3) expressed knowledge of herself as a leader both professionally and personally. As Research Question 2 drew attention to the uplift strategies and practices employed by participants, further research in this area could expand understandings of the broad range of approaches to uplift being actionized.

This study found congruency between how these Black First Ladies were reared and how they perceived what it means to be a leader in the home and in the community. In an examination of Black women and community leadership, Saegart (1989), found that Black women leaders often link cooperative organization to the dynamics of family, and recognize the value of maintaining strong social bonds (Saegart, 1989). Delany and Rogers (2004) support this line of research as well and suggest that Black women in the U.S., in the midst of marginalization based on race, gender and class, learn to lead in large part from intersecting messages from family members. For the participants in this study, their understandings of the role that Black women play in society was heavily influenced by the daily lives and direct messages of immediate family members and by pivotal experiences with Black female mentors they encountered along their professional journeys.

Kimberly Griffin (2013) has closely examined both the challenging and beneficial aspects of mentorship among Black women in professional settings. Griffin notes that experiencing similar challenges, particularly connected to discrimination and racism, positions
Black women to be well equipped to offer unique support and encouragement to other Black women (Griffin, 2013). In the discussion of legacy, and what they might like to be most remembered for, Claire, Elizabeth and Candy spoke of enduring understandings around lessons learned that they would like to share with generations of Black women leaders to come. The sentiments of these Black First Ladies—to forward lessons learned for the betterment of Black community—echo those of Black women abolitionists who, centuries before these women existed, worked tirelessly to eradicate the transatlantic slave trade (Neal & Dunn, 2020). Further, Black women abolitionists, who were often teachers, used education as a primary strategy for resistance (Neal & Dunn, 2020).

The notion of teaching those that follow you and imparting the lessons you have learned is deeply rooted the African American community and nestled inextricably in the motivations of Black women to fight for the uplift of their communities (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Similarly, the message of uplift is woven into the fabric of the Black community and undergirds the sense of responsibility and accountability that drives the will of Black leaders in general, and Black women specifically, to roll up their sleeves, dig in and give back to the people and the communities that have provided them with tools and dispositions to succeed (Neal & Dunn, 2020). Study participants’ views of their roles in racial and community uplift and the leadership strategies they employed greatly relied on the contexts of each Black First Lady’s familial experiences, experiences in early and collegiate education, as well as experiences at the professional level. There is a Scripture (2001) that reads, “To whom much is given, much will be required”(G.E.M. Pub, 2001). Each woman saw encouragement and uplift of others as her responsibility and duty, based on the advantages and opportunities afforded her. Through the practices of mediation, conflict resolution, forging human connection, or advocating for others
these women step in and offer their strengths to others. The study findings are important, because they provide evidence of the capacity of Black women to simultaneously persevere and empower others. The collection of stories from study participants provided significant insight into why and how these Black First Ladies engaged in racial and community uplift from leadership platforms that they did not actively seek. These participants put their convictions around enhancing the quality of life for the members of their communities into action by inserting their diverse and well-honed skill sets into the campuses and cities where their husbands are employed as HBCU presidents. They each worked to promote the well-being of their communities and stakeholders in unique and impactful ways.

The Black First Ladies in this study discussed experiences that exemplified the occurrence of double jeopardy, the harsh reality that being both Black and female places Black women at the center of two groups that have been historically oppressed, dismissed and marginalized based on these two aspects of their identities. Participants shared stories of lowered expectations set for them in school and in the workplace based on their race and their gender. One made direct reference to “patriarchy” and another to “colonization” as they engaged in sense making around the stark absence of Black women’s stories in the academic canon. Candy expressed,

Sometimes it has to do with like a patriarchal system, you know? He gets in the way. We just forget that a woman has a story of her own…you know? Just 'cause you got married doesn't mean that you don't exist anymore.

Candy’s succinct observation expresses a weighty and important concept that is worthy of exploration and speaks to relevant tenets of Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and storytelling, that informed the analysis of the data that emerged from this study. Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), supports the understanding of the complex
crossing of multiple facets (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, national origin) of Black women’s identities and informs how this convergence impacts their existence (Crenshaw, 1991). This study surfaced the intersectional identities of Black First Ladies. These women enter their communities to lead and uplift from several distinct vantage points (e.g., race, gender, social standing) that impact the ways that they perceive others and the ways that others perceive them.

It is important to return to hooks’ (2003) position that most Black men recognize the value of Black women in the struggle to uplift the Black race and community, yet though recognized by Black men, Black women still find themselves influenced by Black men’s the “superior will.” Crosby’s (2018) discussion of cultural hegemony, the dominance of one group over another, connects with the hooks’ (2003) notion that Black women have historically had to combat the attacks of racism and enslavement on Black men’s manhood, and Simien’s (2004) position that Black women have had to subordinate their own interests to protect Black men (hooks, 2003; Simien, 2004). It seems important to return to hooks’ position that most Black men recognize the value of Black women in the struggle to uplift the Black race and community, yet though recognized by Black men, Black women still find themselves influenced by Black men’s the “superior will” (hooks, 2003).

The Black First Ladies centered in this study are leaders. They demonstrated leadership qualities in early education, as college students, in the workplace, at home, and in their communities. The intersectional nature of their leadership is evidenced in their stories and shared experiences, yet we do not hear their voices in academia. Crosby’s (2018) discussion of cultural hegemony, the dominance of one group over another, connects with the hooks’ (2003) notion that historically, Black women have had to combat the attacks of racism and enslavement on Black men’s manhood, and Simien’s (2004) position that Black women have had to subordinate their
own interests to protect Black men (hooks, 2003) (Simien, 2004). Each First Lady who participated in this study expressed a deep loyalty to her husband and a fierce commitment to supporting his professional success. All three of these Black First Ladies is afforded a platform from which to be seen and heard because of her marriage to a university president, and each woman expressed a recognition of her place of privilege within the Black and university communities. Interestingly, the data surfaced that these Black First Ladies, these leaders adjacent, were, are and will continue be leaders who work toward the racial and community betterment, separate and apart from the prominent positions their husbands hold, which begs the question: Why have the stories of these particular community leaders not been captured by the academic community? The patriarchal masculinity in the Black community has contributed to the absence of Black First Ladies’ recorded narratives and voices.

Bell hooks’ (2003) discussion of the “superior will” of Black men, also speaks to subjugation of Black women by Black men. This patriarchal masculinity in the Black community provides insight into the existence of the invisibility of Black women (hooks, 1981). This form of cultural hegemony, according to hooks (2003) has contributed to the absence of Black women’s recorded narratives and voices. Yet, each of the Black First Ladies in this study displayed leadership characteristics at an early age. When Claire spoke of her experiences in early childhood she said, “I arrived to school prepared” and “I entered first grade at an elementary school … understanding… ‘You’re a Black child, a chocolate child, in a white environment [in the 60s]. You immediately have to be making your way in the world……’” it indicates the confidence of a leader. Elizabeth asking to stand at the kindergarten classroom door to console her fearful and weepy classmates on the first day of school exemplifies the empathy of a leader. When Candy shared this story about her junior high school guidance counselor
encouraging her to adjust her aspirations, “She says ‘Well, I don't think you can do it.’ Well, that's what I wanted to do, so that's what I did.”, she demonstrated the tenacity of a leader. Each Black First Lady also demonstrated an innate drive to engage in the betterment of her community. These women indicated that they would have inserted themselves into the wellbeing of their communities whether married to their husbands or not. Simultaneously, each woman expressed a deep level of loyalty to her husband and an unwavering commitment to his professional success. Future scholars might find interest in exploring the dynamics that bring two like-minded, ambitious, and community-focused leaders together in marriage and in the pursuit of ensuring a favorable quality of life for those who dwell within their spheres of influence.

At the end of our third interview, Candy noted how refreshing it was to think about her life in this way, as a leader adjacent, who is completely committed to supporting her husband’s professional pathways and simultaneously steadfastly committed to engaging in the uplift of others. She expressed a rationale for why the voices of HBCU presidents’ wives have been absent in academic literature, and she introduced patriarchy as a possible explanation for why we have not heard these stories to date. This study draws attention to the fact that there is a dearth in the literature on the lives of presidential spouses in general, and I found no dialogue in the academic discourse on the lived experiences of Black First Ladies. It is a worthwhile endeavor for future studies to examine the existing factors (e.g., patriarchy, academic colonization) that might contribute to this void in the academic literature. It would of interest to me to examine the data from this study from a Cultural Hegemony, or Black Masculinity theoretical framework. There is a critical need for discourse around the topic of Black First Ladies who utilize the platforms provided them by their husband’s positions as HBCU presidents to uplift others. This
unique and insufficiently attended-to group of leaders has a great deal to teach other and future leaders about engaging in uplift.

bell hooks (1991) discusses Black female invisibility of Black women extensively. Sesko and Biernat (2009) discuss being poorly recognized, unnoticed, and unheard as glaring disadvantages of the intersectional invisibility Black women experience because they are both Black and female (Sesko & Biernat, 2009). This study draws attention to the fact that there is a dearth in the literature on the lives of presidential spouses in general, and I found no dialogue in the academic discourse on the lived experiences of Black First Ladies. There is a critical need for discourse around the topic of Black First Ladies who utilize the platforms provided them by their husband’s positions as HBCU presidents to uplift others. This unique and insufficiently attended to group of leaders has a great deal to teach other and future leaders about engaging in uplift. Freebairn (2016) admonishes that those who are fortunate to have a sphere of public influence are duty-bound to use their power for the greater good. Black First Ladies do indeed have a sphere of influence as evidenced in this study, and their distinctive vantage point— at the intersection of race, gender, and social standing— provides tremendous opportunity to insert their intellect, power, and proven resilience into the Black community in ways from which society as a whole, and researchers interested in leadership and community uplift can learn. This study provided admittance into the lived experiences of three members of a unique subset of leaders in the Black community. These leaders intentionally, wholeheartedly and without financial benefit, uplift the HBCU campuses and communities where their husbands are employed as presidents.

Northouse (2016) defines leadership as a process through which one individual influences a group to achieve a common goal. The women in this study also represent a larger group of Black women who lead who have not been credited for their work or enjoyed their
deserved level of visibility. The voices of these obscure leaders would add greatly to the scholarly discourse. These leaders have not been credited for their work or enjoyed the visibility that they deserve. This study deeply focused on the lived experience and leadership strategies of three Black First Ladies, and found the critical need for the academy (e.g., undergraduate programs, graduate programs, administration) to actively decenter whiteness and expand the conversation to include the experiences of other Black female leaders. An expansion of the conversation around Black female leadership will broaden the existing data set to include a multitude of divergent voices and perspectives. Black First Ladies can be defined as elite members of their communities. The irony of the existence of an “elite status” within a marginalized group (e.g., the Black community) bears highlighting. An awareness of this potentially stratifying phenomenon, for example, was top of mind for the women who founded the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 when the organization adopted the motto “lifting as we climb” (Edwards, 2000). The inferred necessity for this motto is that as a people, African Americans were certain to rise from the oppressed state to which they had been relegated by society. The “lifting as we climb” motto and the “together we will rise” mindset it provokes, are deeply rooted in the principle of African Communalism and the interdependence of African people (Etta, et al., 2016). This disposition of collective success has reverberated among African and African American people through space and time since the beginning of time. With time, Black people have ascended to the highest and most elite levels in American society, evidenced by the most recent appointment of Justice Ketanji Brown-Jackson to the U.S. Supreme Court in April of 2022. Like the founding members of the NACW, who were committed to using their elite positions in society as leverage to uplift others, so do the three lack First Ladies centered in this study.
Many in the Black community consider Black First Ladies to have elite status. According to Mikecz (2012), gaining access, acquiring trust, and establishing rapport with elites can be challenging. What stands out about these women and the ways that they intentionally engage in uplift is that they exhibit the opposite of what Mikecz (2012) describes. There is nothing challenging about connecting with these women. These Black First Ladies hold elite positions in their communities, but there was no evidence to suggest anything elitist about any of them. They position themselves to be visible, accessible, and “findable” in their communities. The access that these leaders provide to their wisdom, insight, and time is a specific strategy they used in their uplift work.

Current and future researchers can also benefit from spending time building relationships and creating networks with women in this unique group. However, it is critical to place a high level of importance on conducting any future research ethically, as trust is an incredibly salient expectation for these highly visible women who spend much of their time in the public eye. Once trust relationships are established, the women in this group are likely to support expanding the circle to ensure more of their stories are told. In the discussion of legacy, Claire pointed out,

We are diasporic people and in all of our movement we have figured out how to find each other….we have planted our flags in all parts of this is country…somehow we know how to still be a Black community…we just keep coming back together.

Black First Ladies know how to find Black First Ladies. Claire, Elizabeth, and Candy would be willing and exceptional recruiters of their sisters in leadership. By tapping into the networks of these Black First Ladies, and thereby expanding the circle of connected knowers (Collins, 2006) future studies could increase the volume of stories, the depth of wisdom and the mass of data that exists in the academy on the experiences of Black women in general and Black First Ladies specifically.
Williams suggests that scholars committed to social change must insist that research on Black women is focused on changing the social conditions that subordinate them (Williams, 2013). The three women at the center of this study, in sharing their stories and accounts of varying attempts to subordinate them and intentionally exclude them from opportunities, provided a valuable starting point for a future study on the existing systems and structures that continue to hinder the forward progress of Black women. Black First Ladies have several overlapping existences. Black Feminist Epistemology, and Critical Race Theory, specifically the work of Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) draw attention to the notion of intersecting identities. Dill (1983) discusses the unifying force of sisterhood among Black women and explains that the similarities these women share has served to bind them together in the face of oppression. At the points where women have historically been subjugated and devalued (Crenshaw, 1991) (e.g., race, gender, class), we find points of great opportunity for Black women to exercise empathy, sisterhood, and collective activism. The data revealed that the diminishing of her own family members or the members of her community, ignite activism within these leaders. Each woman shared accounts of circumstances where advocacy was needed for some stakeholder in her life (e.g., child, colleague, community members, self), and each described how she inserted herself into those circumstances to address the issues. Through their responses to Research Question 2, with its emphasis on identifying strategies Black First Ladies use to engage in uplift, these Black First Ladies surfaced specific practices they each employ: mediation, conflict resolution, connecting, serving, and advocating. Consequently, they each identified moments when people were experiencing hardship or might benefit from a sense of belonging, where she stepped in to offer relief through her skills, talents, and everyday knowledge.
No matter the age, educational level or social station in life, oppressive structures that attempt to subordinate Black women persist and have lingered from generation to generation. Over the course of time Black women used innate fortitude, inner-wisdom, and the ability to survive, endure and ultimately uplift (Hunter and Sellers, 1998) to combat systemic injustices. Frances Beal (2008) identifies capitalism as an example of one of the most insidious systems of injustice that has had detrimental effects on all people, and especially Black people. Beal explains that capitalism was used to perpetuate the subjugation of the Black race. The metaphoric shackles of economic oppression created the literal conditions that made it impossible for a Black man to find gainful and purposeful employment (Beal, 2008). This cruelty toward Black men had a direct impact on Black women. Often, when Black men could not find work, Black women were able to find work doing chores for White families. This menial employment regularly positioned the Black woman as the primary breadwinner for her family, which created the conditions for a significant amount of psychological and long-lasting trauma for Black men and women (Beal, 2008).

Carby (1982) expands on the struggle for Black women beyond just economics and depicts a brawl between Black women and history itself. In Carby’s (1982) personification of history, she expresses the choice that history has made to exclude Black women from its pages, and she points out that when history has chosen to see Black women, it has elected to hypersexualize, devalue, and dehumanize them. The visualization of this battle for dignity and respect, History v. Black Women, helps to better understand and respect the Black woman’s generational and tenacious resistance to subjugation, and dismissal. However, there is an age-old, philosophical debate about whether two things can both be true at the same time. What strikes me about the Black First Ladies in the study is that they demonstrate that two truths can exist.
within the same individual. These women demonstrate an unwavering loyalty and devotion to their husbands and to the advancement and success of their professional endeavors. All the while, they are showing up for and “sure-ing up” their husbands, these Black First Ladies never identify themselves as second to, or less than, their spouses. They do not shrink, function as figureheads, or occupy the shadows because their husband is president. These women are leaders in their own right, and they are acutely and humbly aware of it. These Black First Ladies do and are changing communities with their active and engaged presence. They function strategically and without hesitation to uplift their communities from the platforms afforded them.

Further, it is important that research acknowledge the growing number of HBCU presidents who are women, and this presents another avenue for future research aimed at understanding the intersections of race, gender, and power. While the presidents of HBCUs remain predominately men, in the last decade the number of female presidents at HBCU’s has steadily increased (Stewart, 2014). Black female leadership in education has been exercised for centuries. For example, in 1904, Mary McLeod Bethune established a missionary school called the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls. Over the course of almost 30 years, this girl’s institute grew, merged with the all-male Cookman Institute, became accredited and changed its name to Bethune-Cookman College in 1931. This female-driven journey of institutional growth and change resulted in Mary McLeod Bethune becoming the first African American woman to serve as an HBCU president (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2022). The United Negro College Fund reported that in the 2018-2019 year, nine of its member institutions had women presidents (UNCF, 2019). Though there is conflicting data around the exact number of HBCU’s where the current top leader is a woman, Gassman (2021) reported that in 2021, 30% of the 107 HBCU presidents were female. The numbers of HBCU presidents are rising,
admittedly not swiftly enough, but the number of females holding the top position at HBCUs is consistently increasing. In his dissertation work, Pinto (2020) found that the innate tenacity of Black women empowers them to overcome oppressive barriers, stereotypes, and oppressive systems and define their own realities. Pinto (2020) found that Black women are currently occupying some of the most influential positions in higher education (Pinto, 2020). With this increase in female HBCU presidents, comes an increase in the number of powerful stories about their ascension into leadership. Research supports that this group of women have had to navigate the same intersectional oppressive structures (racism, sexism, low expectations, patriarchy) (Commodore, et al., 2020) that peppered the leadership paths of Claire, Elizabeth and Candy. It would be beneficial to the academic discourse to broaden the public discussion through the first-hand experiences of these leaders. The extant body of literature, however, currently demonstrates limited interest in capturing the narratives of HBCU female presidents. It would be worthwhile to expand research on the experiences of this growing, yet very small, circle of leaders.

Similarly, as the number of female HBCU presidents rise, in many cases, so do the numbers of presidential spouses. There is great value in collecting the narratives of spouses married to female HBCU presidents. These Black First Spouses hold a wealth of unique experiences that are worth learning. Black scholars, myself included, and the academy more broadly, sorely lack any understanding of the particular experiences, or levels of commitment to racial and community uplift, of these spouses who have also been afforded platforms that they did not actively seek because of the women they married. The lack of existing literature about the spouses of female HBCU leaders means that little is understood about this role. It bears investigating the first-hand accounts of these potential leaders adjacent. I am particularly interested in whether there are similar commitments to the kinds of strategies for uplift we saw
emerge in the data from Claire, Elizabeth, and Candy. There is value in understanding whether HBCU spouses married to female presidents place a similar emphasis on prioritizing family over everything else, or discovering whether, if and how they insert themselves into the communities where their female spouses preside.

Another entry point for future research might be comparing and contrasting the experiences of Black First Ladies married to the presidents of HBCUs to those Black First Ladies who are married to the presidents of PWIs. It would be advantageous to explore the ways that these two groups of women, in these two very different contexts, understand their roles and responsibilities on the campuses where their husbands are presidents. The existing culture, and campus climate at a PWI is remarkably different than that of an HBCU (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Research supports a lack of a sense of belonging for Black female students on PWI campuses and attributes this to the absence of cultural or personal fit between the students and the dominant group (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) report that Black women in leadership positions at PWIs are often otherized, treated as outsiders and ignored (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Examining the experiences of Black First Ladies on PWI campuses could inform whether the lack of cultural and personal fit that Black students report also applies to Black First Ladies, and whether with their particular entry point into the PWI, as First Lady, they experience the kinds of otherizing and lack of voice that Black women leaders at PWIs report (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Scholars should also examine whether the differences in these two campus contexts impact the ways that Black First Ladies use their leadership platforms. The opportunities to learn from the experiences of these two groups of Black First Ladies, from their divergent vantage points, would allow for the examination of the consistencies or inconsistencies where leadership adjacent is concerned. This
data could contribute richly to the discussions around the nuances in campus and community culture, and to the discourse around racial and community uplift. There is ample and growing research in the academy around the leadership of HBCU presidents. However, there is a tremendous gap in the research about their spouses and the leadership they provide. Continued studies might also delve into the relational aspects of Black First Ladies and their spouses.

**Implications for Theory**

In terms of theoretical implications from this study, researchers can benefit from using Black feminist frameworks to understand how Black women have historically undergirded their communities and how they draw upon the skill sets and dispositions honed over the course of their lifetimes to uplift and encourage community members. Black Feminist Thought can be used to center Black women’s ideas and lived experiences in the academic context for the exploration of their experiences (Collins, 2015). Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2015) notes the tendency of scholars to highlight the voices of a few Black women to speak for the experiences of many. This study sought to expand the circle to include Black female voices we have not heard and thus broaden and enrich the understandings of Black female leaders.

Black Feminist Theory deliberately privileges the ideas and experiences of Black women. Collins (2000) explains the disconnect that exists when an attempt is made to understand the experiences of Black women through the perspectives of White feminists (Collins, 2000). I sought to find a structure for my study that would situate the analysis of the ideas and experiences of my participants in familiar and comfortable frameworks (Collins, 2000). I applied the tenets of Black Feminist Thought: 1) Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning 2) The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims; 3) The Ethics of Caring, and 4) The Ethics of Personal Accountability to my attempt to understand the lived experiences of these three
exceptional leaders. Collins (2006) posits that the foundation of knowledge is lived experience and that the author must be central to and present in the story being told (Collins, 2006). My rationale for framing this study in Black Feminist Theory was driven Collins’ position and my personal conviction that centering the narratives of Black women, in their own voices, is the only way to ensure that their stories remain intact during analysis (Collins, 2006). The findings of this study are substantiated by the frameworks selected to ground this narrative inquiry. Black Feminist Theory, as the primary framework, combined with certain relevant tenets of Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and storytelling, provided the grounding for this study. Evidence of the tenets of Black Feminist epistemology that Collins (2006) and Crosby (2018) identify surfaced in the exploration of the narratives of these Black First Ladies.

Collins (2006) expresses that the knowledge that Black women possess about the driving forces of intersecting oppressions, coupled with the wisdom they hold to navigate these oppressions, are essential for Black women’s survival (Collins, 2006, p. 275). The ability of the Black First Ladies who participated in this study to navigate these intersecting oppressions was evident in the data and served as a motivator for taking action to improve the quality of life for those around them. Black women have historically embraced the responsibility of making sure that their fellow community members had the tools necessary to succeed (Jean-Marie, 2006) despite having been forced to navigate a world structured to deny them their own quality of life, without their own sets of tools. This kind of specified agency manifested itself in the narratives of study participants. All three women at the center of this study are extremely “others-oriented.” The drive to advocate for those who cannot or have not been provided opportunities to advocate for themselves is evident in the narrative of each study participant. In sharing her uplift journey, each Black First Lady referenced inviting others to partake in resources (i.e., wisdom, lessons
learned, strategies, her home) that she was fortunate enough to gain along the way with those who might not have had the luxury to acquire them. This disposition to uplift is deeply nestled in the collective African American experience. Martin (2020) notes the long, hard fight of disadvantaged groups that include Black people in general and Black women specifically, to create a society that is more just, equitable and fair. The centuries of physical bondage inflicted upon Black people and the post-emancipation era found Black people stationed on the lowest rung of the American social structure (Martin, 2020). Efforts to uplift the race out of the mire of oppression have been ongoing since the beginning of the Black experience in America.

Collins (2006) describes Black women as connected knowers who identify with the topic of investigation from personal experience. The Black First Ladies at the center of this study identify deeply with this topic. They are connected in a viscerally personal way, and the deep connections that they have with their own lived experiences engaged them immediately in this process. Their levels of engagement as connected knowers communicated a demand for the delicate handling of each and every story. The research questions for this study were developed expressly to center study participants, Black First Ladies, as the experts on the subject matter. Crosby (2018) expresses the need for researchers to locate expertise and authority around any subject matter within the lives of the people who have experienced the subject first-hand (Crosby, 2018). From Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006), I drew upon the crucial notions of storytelling and counter-storytelling as the mechanism for excavating the rich experiential knowledge of the participants. Centering the stories, counter-stories and narratives of these Black First Ladies honors the voices of this unique group of community leaders who have been historically silent and ignored in the scholarly literature (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006). Because of the intimate connection these Black First Ladies had to their lived experiences, the
stories they told and the insights they offered shed light on how the driving forces of intersecting oppressions impacted their journeys and also how they navigated those oppressions, survived, and thrived. The notions that lived experience resides at the foundation of knowledge (Collins, 2006), and the idea that Black women are the authorities on their own stories, are exemplified in the reflections of these remarkable women. One example of this sense of ownership for one’s own story came to life in this statement Claire made toward the end of our third interview. She said, “You are giving us the opportunity to let us decolonize the Academy in a way that we not only get to tell the story, but we get to tell the story in our own language.” Claire expresses gratitude for the opportunity to share her story and hear the stories of others. She explicitly indicates that the stories of Black women and especially those of Black First Ladies, in their own voices, and from their own places of truth, have been ignored at best, and at worst actively dismissed from the academic discourse.

Collins’ (2006) further expounds on The Ethics of Caring model and its implications for understanding the lived experiences of Black women (Collins 2006). My research model for this exploration into the experiences of Black First Ladies that influence why they engage in the uplift of others from platforms they did not actively seek, followed Collins’(2006) Ethics of Caring model. Collins (2006) explains this research model as the combination of emotion and intellect. She explains that knowledge is value laden and that researchers cannot completely free themselves from making judgments in the process of gathering information.

Griots are respected members of many West African communities. These specially trained and orators, singers and storytellers serve their communities as oral historians and as the keepers of generational history. I have seen, and display in my own home, African artwork that use varying techniques to depict these highly respected members of their communities. Though
the mediums may vary, in each depiction of a griot I have ever seen, eager listeners surround the seated griot’s feet, and lean in with seemingly great anticipation to absorb the wisdom and internalize the history that the storyteller showers over them. The Three Interview Series allowed me to position myself, a Black female scholar, at the proverbial feet of three wise and accomplished Black female leaders, three times each for between 45 to 90 minutes per interview. In the hours that I spent with these Black First Ladies, I was the embodiment of Ntozake Shange’s (1983) position that emotion and intellect are complimentary faculties. It was impossible for me to ignore the emotion and the beauty in the stories of the participants for the sake of scholarship. The notion of Nyam that Sobel (1979) posited, that says each individual is part of a collective spirit, power, or energy explains why a gamut of emotions (e.g., pride, joy, sadness, triumph) so deeply resonated in my spirit as I attended to each of the voices and absorbed the stories of these Black First Ladies during our interviews. Collins’ (2006) offers a theoretical connection to the Nyam concept. Collins (2006) purports that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to knowledge validation.

Evidence that the connection between emotion and intellect was reciprocal between researcher and participant was demonstrated by the responses of each Black First Lady at the end of each of their final interviews. The final question to each participant was, “Is there anything else you want to share that I have not asked?” Each response evidenced an ever-present, unnamed, sisterhood, an enveloping sister-leadership, that exists when Black women who lead and who uplift occupy the same spaces. Each the three Black First Ladies answered that intentionally open-ended question by dedicating a portion of her response to encouraging me directly, and emotionally. Claire said,

I am grateful that you are taking this opportunity of scholarship to tell this story right. As you have been this story and continue to be the story. You are giving us the opportunity
to let us decolonize the Academy in a way that we not only get to tell the story, but we get to tell the story in our own language…Thank you.

Elizabeth encouraged,

I’d like to share my appreciation to you for moving forward, for having a family for being a presidential spouse and not losing yourself and your own notion of what you had in your vision and aspiration for yourself. This role asks more of us. We are mothers, spouses, community workers, social justice activists…You are showing that you can do it all, but you don’t make it look like you’re “better than” once you get to the top. I would like to encourage you to keep your footing…never let anybody define your household or your place as First Lady in a way that doesn't feel comfortable for you and who you are.

Candy admonished,

This is about asking a question and just listening to the journey and how similar the journeys are, you know? We all have a different path. There's some sort of spirit that lives in us. It may be by design, or nature, or whatever, but we just keep doing it. You, just keep doing it.

To the great extent that I was emotionally and intellectually invested in this study and in the lived experiences of these Black First Ladies, so too were they invested emotionally and intellectually in mine. The invaluable time spent in communication with these women enlivened the tenet of Black Feminist epistemology that identifies dialogue as central to assessing knowledge (Collins 2006).

Finally, Black Feminist Theory and tenets of other related frameworks (e.g., Critical Race Theory, Social Justice Leadership Theory, Womanism, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology) are helpful for scholars to apply in the continued pursuit of understanding the complex experiences of Black First Ladies. These frames may also be applied to look at the data in this study in new ways. Womanism (Collins, 1996) (Simmons, 2007) is a framework that decenters the white perspectives often associated with feminism in the pursuit of understanding the insights and realities of Black women. Womanism welcomes the natural societal contributions of all women.
and particularly of interest to this subject matter, provides space for Black women to self-define and inform their own perspectives about Black womanhood (Collins, 1996).

Relatedly, Simmons (2007) expounds on the agency that Endarkened Feminist Epistemology provides Black Women in the expression of novel and critical feminist insights from their own perspectives. Dillard (2003) as shared by Simmons, posits that the term enlightened has historical roots in the well-established Western canon of White feminist thought, and it lacks relevancy to Black women’s articulation of their own lived experiences. Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, therefore, respects the contrast in cultural perspective and calls for a focus on the intersectional nature (e.g., race, gender, class) of Black women’s lives (Simmons, 2007).

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study I recommend three targets for K-12 educator (e.g., teachers, coaches, administrators) training. Because the context for my study is squarely rooted in higher education, it is important that I clarify my rationale for focusing my recommendations on K-12 practice. I see K-12 educators as the target audience here for one fundamental reason. The leadership narratives of each of these community leaders began and was indelibly impacted in grades K-8. Abolitionist and revered statesman Fredrick Douglass said, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” It is with sincere respect, and from an endarkened feminist lens that I expand Dr. Douglass’ profound charge to include girls and women. This study revealed a critical need for educators and child development professionals to engage in developing confident and competent (e.g., strong, fearless, empathetic, critical thinking, risk taking, kind, hardworking) Black girls strategically and intentionally, so there will be no need repair broken women. In this spirit and in honor of the confident and competent girls who
flourished into Claire Holmes, Elizabeth Rose, and Candy Ridge, Black First Ladies, and community leaders, I focus on educators at the elementary and secondary levels.

As a Black female scholar and K-12 educator, I propose a multi-layered approach that would have tremendous impact on transforming the practices of K-12 teachers of Black children. I recommend educator training programs designed to enable the teachers of Black children to create pedagogical spaces that honor, celebrate and cultivate the inherent potential of all of their students. An emphasis on the skillful delivery of high-quality, culturally affirming pedagogy in the K-12 education space is my recommendation for practice. *K-12 Teachers of Black students must be engaged in mandatory, high-quality professional learning that is steeped in:* 1) both cognitive and neuroscience, 2) mediation theory, and 3) challenges to existing, and potentially damaging belief systems.

1) **Training in Cognitive and Neuroscience**

Author and respected pedagogues, Harry, and Rosemary Wong (1998), admonish practitioners that students cannot be held accountable for skills that their teacher has not directly taught (Wong, 1998). In that same respect, teachers and the other adults that surround Black children in school (counselors, support personnel, administrators) should be supported in learning the philosophy, practices, strategies, and skills associated with what is happening in the brain and the body of students when optimal learning is taking place. Adults must also be made acutely aware of the conditions that hinder and even halt optimal learning for Black students.

Yvette Jackson, author of the seminal text, *The Pedagogy of Confidence*, identifies the need for K-12 educators of African American students to become familiar with the research surrounding cognitive and neuroscience that confirms the impact of the overwhelming and often debilitating stress that Black, school-dependent, students experience as a result of the
discriminatory behaviors (e.g., prejudice, degradation, stereotype threat, marginalizing language) specifically inflicted upon them in school (Jackson, 2011). This stress is continually perpetuated by professionals who are often operating from the perceived good will that Elizabeth experiences in the workplace. These educators may truly have the best intentions, however poorly trained teachers with good intentions are dangerous for the academic development of school dependent Black students. I suggest that these adults lack the knowledgebase, skillset or will to recognize that this stress is directly impacting those brain and body functions that make behaviors associated with the learning process (e.g., reasoning, risk taking, reflection, goal setting) possible (Jackson, 2011, p. 48). Claire reflected on an experience in school that exemplifies the stress Jackson refers to. She recounted,

If I kind of go back to 1966-67, I think about the unrest that was happening…racialized issues. It was probably when I was in fourth grade where I was feeling acutely racialized an ostracized and not really supported, but before that when I was in second grade I had a teacher that took the three African American students (maybe in a class of 30)...and I'm one of those three…and we had to sit separately in desks facing the walls while everybody else sat in the center.

My professional journey has provided me great occasion to engage with student and parents across the country who share similar experiences to what Claire described. Sadly, these kinds of offenses continue in classrooms across this country 55 years later, in 2022. Whether educators, like Claire’s in the reflection above, or those that I learn about from students and parents lack the awareness, skill or will, to educate Black students effectively, a robust training program in cognitive and neuroscience would provide two critical leverage points: 1) an opportunity for educators to develop the necessary awareness and skill set to change destructive behavior, and 2) the ability to hold accountable or reward these adults for their professional actions related to creating the conditions where Black students can thrive. Jackson (2011) suggests that the recognition of the deep effects of race on the beliefs around Black students’ learning is the first
step in countering the negative perceptions that perpetuate low expectations and faulty assumptions that too often plague Black students in the learning process (Jackson, 2011, p.49).

2.) Training in Mediation Theory

Claire’s reflection on her experiences in second and fourth grades provide examples of how her teachers’ choices could have been detrimental to her educational trajectory. The messages she internalized at home, about her own academic preparedness, school readiness and intellectual capability, empowered Claire to circumvent the discrimination and low expectations inflicted upon her by her teachers. Yvette Jackson (2005) posits that low expectations for their Black students influence teachers’ choices and lead to “under-challenging” instruction. Jackson explains that such limited instruction is often translated by students into messages that result in a lack of confidence in their own abilities and intelligence. Such internalized low expectations, if not met with a deep belief in one’s own potential, can perpetuate a cycle of underachievement (Jackson, 2005) for Black students. The affirming messages Claire received from her parents protected her from this very cycle of underachievement. In fact, those parental messages of achievement propelled Claire to navigate and masterfully matriculate through the rigors of academia despite the lowered expectations and inexperience of her elementary teachers.

Countless organizations in the United States have identified sets of specific standards that outline the essential knowledge, dispositions and skills effective teachers should possess. One such group, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) outlines 10 valuable considerations, rooted in rudimentary practices, that are admittedly important for teachers to be aware of, and are concurrently, completely void of any acknowledgement of the richly diverse and magnificently distinctive frames of reference that eagerly enter and occupy K-12 classrooms across this country, with young scholars who expect to be inspired, empowered, and
pushed to the frontier of their cognition (Jackson, 2011). As a K-12 educator, I see tremendous value in supporting teachers in the examination of the impact that culturally affirming pedagogy has on student learning.

Over the course of more than 30 years, I have crossed paths with countless Black girls with tremendous potential, intellect, and yearning for educational experiences that honor and invite their cultural frames of reference into the learning process. Esteemed author and Black girl advocate Monique Morris has written extensively about the criminalization of Black girls in schools and the fight for their liberation. Morris (2019) posits that the criminalization of Black girls, among others has resulted in maladaptive and punitive classroom environments. Morris shines a light on the deep trauma inflicted when Black girls are subjected to dysfunctional classrooms. Exposure to these intersectional biases can result in the onset of toxic stress. Toxic stress can lead to complications with physical development and a hinderance of these girls’ ability to function with any sense of normalcy (Morris, 2019).

Cognitive Psychologist Reuven Feuerstein devoted his life’s work to identifying the potential of displaced Jewish children who, after fleeing to Romania to escape the genocide of European Jews during The Holocaust in Nazi Germany, found themselves in a new country, in a new school, among strangers, without the familiar and affirming messages of home. As a result of the complex trauma these students suffered (e.g., losing parents, being imprisoned, witnessing death) their academic growth suffered, and they were deemed “uneducable”. When Feuerstein encountered these students, during this developing stage of his educational career, he recognized that the children had innate potential. What they did not have was a deep sense of their own culture. They did not fully understand who they were (Jackson, 2011). Fueled by a firm belief in human capacity, Feuerstein was determined to find a way to counteract the challenges his students
experienced as a result of displacement. Through intensive mediative practices that allowed Feuerstein to surface, with his students, their cultural frames of reference (Jackson, 2011), the aspects of their lives that were most relevant and meaningful to them. Through this cultural mediation, Feuerstein discovered that no matter the obstacle (e.g., socioeconomic, cultural, genetic, emotional, academic) the structure of the human brain can be changed, and deficits can be counteracted with the appropriate mediation (Jackson, 2011). Feuerstein, as shared by Jackson (2011), insists that mediation occurs expressly through culture, and explains that when cognitive skills are taught and cultural experiences are enriched, even the most underperforming individuals can dramatically extend learning growth (Jackson, 2011, p 68).

Dr. Feuerstein’s notion that and one’s understanding of who he or she is and where she or he comes from fortifies student cognition. This notion speaks to my understanding of best practices in education. Jackson (2011) posits that when students lack cultural experiences, for whatever reason, the mediation of a caring member of the community can accelerate their development (Jackson, 2011). Teachers must be steeped pedagogical training that challenges them to acknowledge, honor and seek to understand the culturally diverse groups of learners under their tutelage.

3.) Training that Challenges Belief Systems

Since 1989, The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) has been partnering with school districts to transform teacher practice and challenge belief systems around the innate potential of students of color. Through the Pedagogy of Confidence, a research-based framework proven in practice, NUA works directly with teachers, teacher coaches, and administrators to transform practice so that all students can demonstrate high intellectual performance. Framed with a focus on equity and excellence in education, NUA’s goal is to
empower students with what they need to self-direct their learning and engage in the highest level of psychological development, according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, self-actualization (McLeod, 2018). Motivated by a commitment to equity and the goal of providing the means for professionals and students to become lifelong learners, NUA works within schools and districts to facilitate change in educators’ beliefs about students of color by providing practical and powerful tools to build and to transform learning communities.

NUA holds the belief that when teachers are supported with proven tools and practices designed to bridge cultural divides that hinder learning, and unleash creativity and cognition, student performance changes teacher expectations. Through materials and strategies that expressly attack issues of cultural relevance, NUA supports school districts (e.g., school leaders, teachers, counselors, parents, students) by orchestrating and guiding opportunities for educators to identify the necessary practices to build students’ strengths and engage students in mastering essential concepts, skills, strategies, and content (Nuatc.org, n.d.)

In 2008, Reuven Feuerstein served as the keynote speaker at NU’s annual, national, Teach for Intelligence conference. Thousands of like-minded educators gathered to examine the conference theme, “Believe to Achieve.” Dr. Feuerstein’s words resonate today at the heart of my educational practice. He stated,

Believe to achieve is not just the belief. It is the origins of the belief. This is a note of highest importance. Belief is generated by a need, a need to ensure the quality of life for your fellow man. You cannot see your fellow man stay in this very difficult condition and not come up with the belief that it can be changed. If you need to help your fellow man, your child, then you start to believe and if you believe you will achieve (NatUrbanAlliance, 2008).

The professional learning provided by the National Urban Alliance challenges educators to examine the origins of their beliefs about the children who stand before them. They are engaged
in study, dialogue, and discourse around needs they hold related to the quality of life for all students and particularly their Black students.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this narrative inquiry showed that Black First Ladies share the same title and assume similar roles in the HBCUs where their husbands preside. However, each of these Black women has a unique approach to improving her community, and these unique approaches, strategies, are of particular interest. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explains her commitment to deliberately privileging the ideas of Black women in an effort to counter the historic silencing and ignoring of their stories. According to Crosby (2018) every effort should be made to locate expertise and authority around any matter within the lives of the people who have lived through it. Watkins (2001) cautions that the intentional and systemic silencing of Black women leads to race-based silences and depreciation of Black people in text. Employing the Three Interview Series was this researcher's attempt to provide the space and opportunity for the Black women at the center of this study to amplify their voices and contribute to the textual narratives of the Academy. Candy’s charge, when I asked her if she would like to share anything that was not addressed during her interview series referred to this squelching of Black voices. She responded with a subtle push for the collection of more stories from connected knowers. She suggested,

> We all have a different path. There's some sort of spirit that lives in us. It may be by design, or nature, or whatever, but we just keep doing it.

> *You, just keep doing it.*
APPENDIX A. CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN SUBJECT

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI - COLUMBIA
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY ANALYSIS

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Title: To Whom Much is Given: A Study of Black Female Leadership Within the Context of Spouses of Historically Black College and University Presidents

Principal Investigator: Stefanie B. Rome, under the guidance of Dr. Emily Crawford-Rossi

What is the study about? This study seeks to understand the journeys and lived experiences of HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) spouses, traditionally called "First Ladies," who choose to use their positions to uplift the communities where presidential spouses lead. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the academic discourse around HBCU leadership, racial uplift, and cultural legacy by hearing and recording the first-person narratives of HBCU First Ladies who engage in the uplift of others.

Why are you asking me? I am asking you to participate in this study because you are an HBCU First Lady who is engaged in uplifting others. The narratives of women in your position are absent from academic literature. Your story will provide insight into the factors that motivate Black women, married to HBCU presidents, to use a platform that they did not actively seek to uplift others. I believe your story will inspire other women who may find themselves in positions of influence they did not actively pursue to engage, in their own ways, in the uplift of others.
communities. Your participation will include three 60 to 90 minutes interviews. After conclusions are drawn from the study, you will have the chance to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings drawn from the interview. If you find that the results do not accurately reflect your perceptions, you are invited to negotiate until agreements are reached.

**Is there any audio recording?** Yes. Participants in this study will be interviewed and have their voices recorded. While the interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for accuracy, neither your name nor your institutional affiliations will be associated with the tapes, the transcripts, or reports resulting from this study. Pseudonyms will replace all of your identifying characteristics. Code lists that will be generated from the interviews and signed consent forms will be kept locked in a file cabinet at the residence of ****. Upon completing this dissertation, ***** will immediately destroy the code list, consent forms, resumes, notes, and transcripts. The audiotape will be destroyed after seven years.

**What is the risk involved?** There is no physical harm; however, you may find that some of the interview questions may raise sensitive issues resulting in mild emotional discomfort. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and take a break at any point during interviews. Also, you may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after the interview, without any negative consequences.

**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?** There are no direct benefits to participants in this study. However, your insight may provide a guide for young women married to HBCU presidents.
Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything? Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There are no costs to you for participating in this study.

Contact Information
For questions about this research, please contact **** Ph.D. candidate, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Missouri at (573) 825-7039 or ****@mail.missouri.edu, or dissertation committee chair, Dr. Emily Crawford-Rossi, Associate Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Missouri, at 207A Hill Hall, Columbia, MO 65211 or douglastyr@missouri.edu.

Voluntary Consent
I confirm that I know the purpose and parameters of the research study outlined above. I am aware that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the project at any time with no complications. I hereby provide consent for the use of my quotations and wish to participate in this research endeavor now.

____________________________________
Name (Print or Type)

____________________________________
Signature

____________________________________
Telephone

____________________________________
Date
APPENDIX B. IRB APPROVAL LETTER

November 29, 2021

Principal Investigator: Stefanie Baker Rome
Department: Ed Leadership & Pol Analysis

Your IRB Application to project entitled To Whom Much is Given: A Study of Black Female Leadership Within the Context of Spouses of Historically Black College and University Presidents was reviewed and approved by the MU Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number 2057523
IRB Review Number 316292
Initial Application Approval Date November 29, 2021
IRB Expiration Date November 29, 2022
Level of Review Exempt
Project Status Active - Exempt
Exempt Categories (Revised Common Rule) 45 CFR 46.104d(2)(ii)
Risk Level Minimal Risk
HIPAA Category No HIPAA
Approved Documents
  - Interview Questions
  - Dissertation_letter_of_consent.docx
  - Dissertation_subject_invitation_letter.docx

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

• No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
• All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation utilizing the Exempt Amendment Form.
• Major noncompliance deviations must be reported to the MU IRB on the Event Report within 5 business days of the research team becoming aware of the deviation. Major deviations result when research activities may affected the research subject's rights, safety, and/or welfare, or may have had the potential to impact even if no actual harm occurred. Please refer to the MU IRB Noncompliance policy for additional details.
• The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date to keep the study active or to close it.
• Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.

If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please click here to view the MU Business Policy and Procedure: [http://bppm.missouri.edu/chapter2/2_259.html](http://bppm.missouri.edu/chapter2/2_259.html)
Hello First Lady ________,

I am happy to report that I am entering the final stages of my PhD program at The University of Missouri-Columbia. I just received permission to start data collection for my dissertation and I would be extremely grateful if you would agree to participate as a study subject.

My preliminary dissertation approach is to seek to understand the lived experiences of HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) spouses; traditionally called “First Ladies” who have chosen to use their platform to uplift the communities where their spouses lead. The study participants are current or former spouses of current or former HBCU Presidents who decided to use the leadership platforms bestowed upon them by the positions their husbands occupy to edify, empower and educate the stakeholders in their communities. I plan to use narrative inquiry to capture the unique experiences of a small group of what I call, “leaders adjacent”, who did not actively seek the top leadership position, but who assume and actualize leadership roles in the communities where their spouses are employed. Additional information is included here to provide further context.

My guiding research questions are:

- What are the shared experiences of individuals married to the presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities who choose to use positions of leadership which they did not actively seek to edify and empower the members of the communities in which they are positioned?
- How did “leaders adjacent” (the spouses of Historically Black College and University Presidents placed into positions of leadership which they did not actively seek), elevated by way of marriage or relationship, prepare to assume, and activate their leadership roles?
- What is the impetus of an individual who chooses to intentionally use his or her leadership platform as a tool to positively influence, motivate and/or inspire the next generation of leaders?

I anticipate conducting interviews during the weeks of April 26 and May 14, 2021. I believe that your lived experience will be extremely informative and having your story as part of my dissertation will provide invaluable insight. My goal is to complete the doctoral process in Spring 2022. Please let me know if I can clarify anything. I am grateful for your consideration, and I would love to interview you for my study.
APPENDIX D. RESEARCH INTERVIEW GUIDE

RESEARCH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participant/Pseudonym ____________________________________________

Interview Date ________ Length of Interview ______________________

Interview One

Early Years

1) How would you describe your demographic background?
2) Where did you grow up (state, city, neighborhood, etc.)?
3) How do you describe the area where you grew up?
4) How would you describe your childhood?

5) Describe your family. What kind of roles did you hold in the family? What influence did other family members have on your development? Educational Journey

1) How would you describe your K-12 experience: great, good, average, not good, awful?
2) If you attended college or university, how did you decide to attend? How did you choose which to attend?
3) How would you describe your college experience as a young Black Woman?
4) How did you decide to pursue an advanced degree?
5) How would you describe the challenges you encountered as a student?
6) How did your teachers, family members, and acquaintances help shape your academic life? Were there particular messages from any of them that resonated deeply with you?

Professional Journey

1) How and why did you select your career?

2) How, specifically, have you been supported in the workplace?

3) How have you supported the uplift of others in the workplace?

4) How would you describe the degree to which you have been accepted as a professional Black woman in the workplace?

5) How would you describe obstacles you had to overcome/deal with as you progressed through your career? What strategies did you use to overcome those challenges?

Family Life

1) How did you meet your husband?

2) How did you learn of his aspiration to be a university president? HBCU president?

3) How did his professional journey impact yours?

4) How would you describe any sacrifices you have had to make to support your husband’s professional goals?

5) How have you tried to balance the responsibilities of marriage, motherhood, and career?

6) Regarding family life, how do you set priorities?

Community Engagement

1) What is the most enjoyable aspect of being an HBCU president’s wife?
2) How would you describe the most challenging aspect(s) of being the First Lady? How do you cope with your challenges?

3) How do you involve yourself in uplifting others?

4) How (specifically) would you describe the way(s) you are involved in the campus activities where your husband is the president?

5) How (specifically) would you describe the way(s) you are involved in the community where you and your family live?

6) How would you say your identity has shaped your interactions on campus? Community?

7) As a First Lady, how do you perceive your responsibility to get involved around issues of equity, diversity, and injustice in your community?

**Cultural Legacy**

1) How do you explain Black women’s role and continue to play in uplifting the Black community?

2) How do you explain the legacy you want to leave behind?

**Interview Two**

1) What do you do each day related to _____________? (building on information surfaced in interview one)

2) Tell me about your relationship with (your/the) ________________ (husband, members of x board, students, committee members, etc.)

3) Reconstruct a(n) ____________ (x committee, x club, x council, etc.) meeting day from the time you wake up until the time you fall asleep.
4) Tell me a story about an experience you had as a(n) ____________________ (child, college student, wife, mother, professional) that influenced ____________ (development referred to in Interview One).

5) Tell me a story about an experience you had as a(n) ____________________ (child, college student, wife, mother, professional) that influenced ______________ (decision referred to in Interview One).

6) Tell me a story about an experience you had as a(n) ____________________ (child, college student, wife, mother, professional) that influenced ______________ (disposition referred to in Interview One).

Interview Three

Sample question stem:

Given what you have said about ______________ then and ______________ now, what does ______________ mean to you?

Given your story about __________, how would you describe the skills/attributes you possess that _____________ (university, community, spouse) might be unaware of?

Given your reflection about __________, how would you explain to a First Lady new to her role your commitment to using your platform for racial and community uplift?

Conclusion

1. What legacy do you want to leave?

2. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not already covered?

3. Can I contact you if necessary to clarify answers?

4. Thank you for your participation in this study.
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VITA

Stefanie Baker Rome is a career educator. She started in the elementary classroom and has enjoyed a journey from classroom teacher to Literacy Coach to Literacy Advisor; Teacher Mentor, Curriculum Coordinator to Training Coordinator, Project Director to Director of Professional Development, to her current role as the Executive Director of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. Stefanie is a “two-time Tiger”, earning her master’s degree and completing her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia. A Los Angeles, California native, Stefanie has had numerous opportunities to contribute her professional strengths nation-wide. Whether on the West Coast, East Coast, in the Midwest or in the South, Stefanie has committed her professional life to urban education research and scholarship. She studies and applies strategies and practices that foster pedagogical spaces where all students are honored, celebrated, academically challenged and where their inherent potential is actualized.

Stefanie's work has been featured in the education space in publications, including the Journal for Negro Education and Education Week. She has presented in numerous professional settings, including the Teach for Intelligence Conference, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), National Charter Schools Conference, The Alumni of Color Conference (AOCC) at Harvard, and the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism (ISGAP) at Oxford. Stefanie provides support to educators and students in school districts and systems across the country. She serves her local community at the board level by lending her leadership strengths to organizations committed to enhancing the quality of life for children and families. Whether in the classroom or the boardroom, Stefanie is proudest of being the mother of amazing 17-year-old twins. She is a member of numerous service-centered organizations, including Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, The Links, Incorporated, and Charms, Incorporated.