

The HistoryMakers founder urges entrepreneurs to pursue passion

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An idea conceived on the dining room table, The HistoryMakers, focuses on the stories of untold and well-known African Americans. It was that same idea founder and executive director Julieanna Richardson spoke to University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff students, faculty and community members about on Thursday as a part of the Winthrop Rockefeller Distinguished Lecture Series on "Why Entrepreneurship Now" at the Hathaway-Howard Fine Arts Building.

"I think it's very important and very valuable to African Americans and actually to everyone here -- those on the campus and those in the community to hear from renowned speakers like Miss Julieanna Richardson," UAPB Chancellor Laurence Alexander of her visit to the campus as a part of the series. "She has done a remarkable job of recording history. She's put together more than 5,000 hours of oral histories of African Americans and that is significant in and of itself."

According to the University of Arkansas System's website, it's the official home for the administration of the Winthrop Rockefeller Distinguished Lecture Series. The series cycles through five campuses including the University of Arkansas, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, University of Arkansas at Monticello and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff with lectures that are free and open to the public. Established in 1972, the Winthrop Rockefeller Distinguished Lectures Program was created to help faculty at those five universities with gathering visiting lecturers to communicate ideas that essentially stimulate public discussion, intellectual debate and cultural advancement.

“It’s significant to all people to understand the significant contributions that African Americans have made to the history of the city, the state and this nation and to appreciate it for its richness, its depth and appreciate it not just one month of the year but all year long,” said Alexander. “When you get that on the campus of an HBCU, it enriches the learning that takes place on-campus and it brings to the forefront what we’re all about in terms of our educational mission and that is enhancing their education with things they wouldn’t ordinarily get in their daily walk in life. So, if we can bring that kind of value to this community, I think the Winthrop Rockefeller Distinguished Lecture Series has done a great work.”

Richardson, who has a diverse background that includes law and television, brought the idea of The HistoryMakers to her mother and family who she says at the time didn’t believe it was a market for what she was trying to do -- capture the stories of African Americans and make them accessible to all. A national 501© (3), The HistoryMakers, was founded in 1999 with the purpose to educate, show, highlight, showcase and preserve African American history. Richardson saw a need for the collection especially with the last known record being the WPA Slave Narratives, she says.

“I think we’re just at the beginning stages, but we’re just one of the entities that’s in the history preservation and so all we need to do is work together and this will lift a lot of people up,” said Richardson. “More importantly, we’re not creating anything. We’re just documenting what people already did.”

Senior mass communication student Gabriel McDonald was one of many students in the crowd who listened to Richardson share her business insight and love for history.

“She’s a very distinguished, young woman and I just wanted to come out and see what she had to say about her organization, The HistoryMakers,” said McDonald. “Our teachers have told us a lot about it and her as well and I just wanted to learn more about her and everything she does. Tonight, I basically learned her history and what she wants to do with her brand and her organization and where she wants to go with it and everything.”

With several students in attendance, UAPB Public Information Officer Tisha Arnold said Richardson’s insight on history and business was valuable not only entrepreneurs, but also everyone.

“I think it was groundbreaking,” she said of the lecture. “She brought a facet to understanding history that most people don’t think about. People think about the old... stuff that they grew up learning in school and I don’t know if the school districts really understood the impact that we’re seeing--- that people didn’t understand how very interesting history can be. So, I like that she brought that out. History is interesting and history is fascinating when you look at it from the right perspective.”

Despite her family’s uncertainty, she pushed through to fulfill her dream in creating The HistoryMakers, which is now the largest national collection of African American video oral histories on record. But, it wasn’t without hard work, consistency, and even hard times. Richardson shared her story of breaking down one night after having to lay off her entire staff due to financial constraints. However, she managed to push through and continue on with her business goals.

“I think at one point that I did not know that I would see success in my lifetime,” Richardson said.

“But, I felt this was so important even if people did not know the importance during the time that I would walk this earth. But, the fact is right now, when I see it and see people responding to it, its’ brought tears to my eyes.”

One of Richardson’s goals when creating the business model for her company was to complete a total of 5, 000 interviews 2,000 of which she says still need to be done. Additionally, she has hopes for the future of The HistoryMakers as a platform where others can share their historical information.

“My dream is that we use this platform, but create another version of it that people can add their own content to our content,” she said. “And that would be pretty powerful if we have the ability to do that.”

Knowing all too well the impact of naysayers and doubters, Richardson encouraged everyone in the crowd to never let anyone stop them from following through with their plan as she is living proof of defying the odds.

“I think that for entrepreneurs or people that have a vision or they can see things, pay attention to the numbers,” Richardson said. “But, follow your passion and your gut instinct. You follow it. People will come along in time. There are

people now who say to me, 'are you surprised?' or they say, 'did you ever think it would be like this?'

Richardson, who created her own lane when she didn't see one, provided a three point system for those hoping to step out and follow their dreams.

"My vision for what will we be is further than what I am right now," she said.

"With people who have a vision and a passion, I say that passion, plan and purpose makes a perfect combination and there will be no stopping you."



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