

the community builder

As the first African-American girl to graduate from her Chicago-area elementary school, Dolores Gaunty-Porter suffered insults and hurled rocks from students who didn't want her there. Whether or not she intended it, her career has been an answer to that, as she became a leader in education and community building, and now a professor at VU.

"I think God gave me a calling in community building, having experienced many border crossings," she says. "I enjoy creating and advancing a sense of community in my classrooms."

Gaunty-Porter grew up in Chicago, the oldest of eight children, living for a time in a three-level flat with her immediate family on the first level, her grandparents on the next, and an uncle and aunt on the third. Her mother, a librarian, had a degree in French from the University of Chicago and believed in keeping the children busy, so Gaunty-Porter took piano, voice and violin lessons, sewing, shorthand and typing. But in school, she was hopelessly bored.

"I remember in Kindergarten wondering why I had to go," she says. "School was not difficult. I already knew how to read. I was quiet and did what they told me to do. But I was bored."

Yet she played school with her siblings, setting up desks and chairs and orchestrating the classroom with the many books that were always in her home.

Then, as an eighth-grader, her family moved to an all-white neighborhood in Chicago and Gaunty-Porter ran the gauntlet at school.

"That's where I became aware of people feeling uncomfortable with who they are," she says. "One guy would bother me and call me names when others weren't thinking of me. I realized he didn't like who he was because he looked like me. He had olive skin with black curly hair."

She cried only once that year because of harassment, kept up

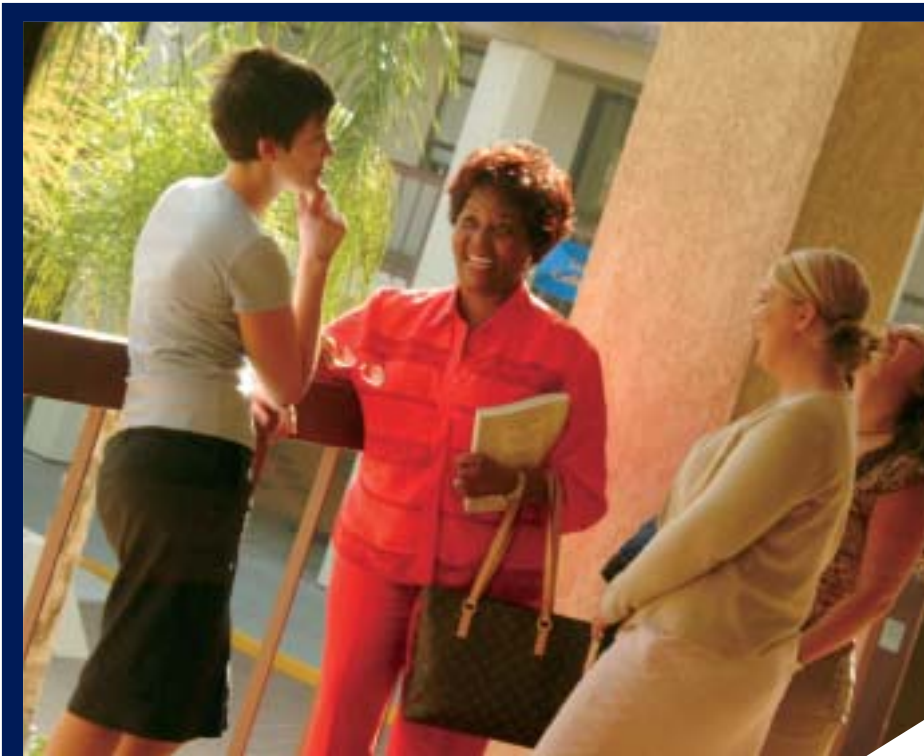


her extra credit assignments and scored high on tests. The teachers, she says, were helpful.

"I was a tough little girl," she says. "I had my church, family and friends. I really felt like the people who rejected me didn't know any better."

Then her family moved to Los Angeles, and Gaunty-Porter found herself in a strange world of a different sort. People seemed caught up in social cliques, clothes and cars, she says. When they learned she was from Chicago, they expected her to be streetwise, which she wasn't. Graduation day was

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Gaunty-Porter creates communities in the classroom and turns students into “border crossers.”

welcomed, but she didn't know what she wanted to do, and her family expected her to go to college. So, though she spoke no Spanish at the time, she tagged along with a friend to Mexico City and enrolled in La Universidad de Las Americas, and there Gaunty-Porter discovered her life passion.

“When I student taught, during the last semester of my undergraduate program, my world opened up,” she says. “I thought, ‘This is it. This is my niche.’”

She began waking up at night with lesson plans flooding her mind. She excelled among her peers. After graduation with her B.A., she returned to Chicago to teach and had a “tough, tough experience that honed me for life,” she says. “Every teaching assignment after that was relatively easy for me.” She returned to Mexico City for her next teaching position, and subsequently taught again in Chicago, then in California, Indiana and New York, with programs at pre-school through adult levels, in regular, bilingual (Spanish/English), and English as a Second Language settings.

While earning the M.Ed. in elementary education from the University of Southern Mississippi, a professor persuaded her to go for her Ph.D. in Reading, which she earned from State University of New York, Albany. All the while, she sought God for guidance at every turn, as she had since she was a child.

“Church and home were intertwined,” she says. “I know what it is to have church seven nights a week because there was a revival. I've prayed at every transition, seeking wise counsel from people who have a spiritual impact on my life.”

And so she chose, upon finishing her Ph.D., to return to L.A. because of its cultural diversity. In 2002, she came full-time to VU's graduate education department, attracted by the opportunity to combine faith with teaching.

“I knew VU had a good reputation,” she says. “The education department is highly recognized in California. It attracts excellent students. We have the same mindset and same mission. Again I'm in my niche.”

In teaching teachers, she focuses on border crossing, overcoming what she calls “this sense of otherness, of being left out. That sense of otherness is just a category created by people and imposed to keep people at a distance.”

One remedy, she says, is in building strong communities in the classroom.

“I endeavor to create a safe place for people to express their uniqueness as they question ideas, consider that we all have multiple identities, and look for places to celebrate and affirm diversity,” she says.

“People shouldn't feel less than because they have a difference of opinion. VU has intentional diversity which challenges that category of otherness. I feel very comfortable moving that along.”

Gaunty-Porter holds a life, standard teaching credential with the State of California, is a certified cooperative learning instructor, is a trainer in diversity for the California Beginning Teacher Support Assessment Program, and conducts numerous workshops relevant to literacy development. She dreams of having a literacy center at VU, where students in the Graduate Education Department work with local public and private school students who are struggling with reading and writing.

When not teaching, Gaunty-Porter enjoys reading, collecting cookbooks, cooking, visiting family in Chicago and traveling internationally with husband Lee Porter, a vice president of academic affairs at a local community college. Both are bilingual, and after their recent lecture tour in China, Lee decided to learn Mandarin Chinese in preparation for the 2008 Olympics in China.

“He said, ‘How can you be in a world with this many people speaking this language and not know it?’” Gaunty-Porter says “This has challenged me to also learn the language.”

It's another step toward breaking down barriers and building community, one of the strong themes in Gaunty-Porter's life.

“I did not plan my career,” she says. “My steps have been ordered by God. I've been very, very blessed. My life has unfolded and it's been wonderful.” 🙏