

## **Ambassador Dr. Cynthia Shepard Perry: A Sycamore Destined for Greatness**

**By Crystal Mikell-Reynolds, Ph.D. with Ambassador Shepard Perry, Ph.D.**

### **Introduction**

Ambassador Cynthia Shepard Perry is perhaps best known for her role as Ambassador to the African nations of Sierra Leone, and Burundi, and as Executive Director of the African Development Bank in Tunisia. This dynamic woman, born in Lost Creek, a suburb of Terre Haute, Indiana, was destined for greatness, according to her prophetic father, a veteran of WWI. He saw her birth date on November 11, Veteran's Day, and her keen intellect as a sign that she was exceptional. Her father's premonition about her would in fact come to fruition: in her thirty-year career as a United Nations and American diplomat, appointed by three serving presidents, in service to the diverse peoples of Africa, and in her own local communities.

Much has been written about her years as an American Ambassador and as Executive Director of the African Bank. However, relatively little is known about her years at Indiana State University (ISU) her undergraduate alma mater, located in Terre Haute, Indiana. Now an octogenarian, she maintains that her years at Indiana State University helped to shape her natural abilities and to provide the foundation she needed in the fields of Political Science and Art. This essay seeks to briefly examine the life of Ambassador Perry, but more importantly, to focus specifically on the story of her years at Indiana State University.

### **Early Years**

Ambassador Perry, named Cynthia Helena Norton, was born in Lost Creek, Indiana, November 11, 1928, the second daughter of George and Flossie Norton. Her father, a veteran of World War I, believed that the day of her birth was significant. His service in France, during World War I, concluded in the signing of an Armistice in 1918, in the eleventh month, the eleventh day, at the eleventh hour. Exactly ten years later, Cynthia was born on the same date and at the same time as the end of WW I. He was convinced that the timing of her birth was not coincidental, that she was special and destined for greatness.

Cynthia was the sixth of nine children, five girls and four boys, growing up in a small rural settlement called the Lost Creek community in Vigo County just a few miles outside Terre Haute, Indiana. Her particular ancestors arrived as early as 1828, prior to the Civil War, 100 years before Cynthia's birth. This farming community was settled by a mixed group of White American, Black American, and Native American families and individuals. Some were escaping the remaining visages of slavery or servitude while others were seeking opportunities for a better life.

Most Lost Creek settlers, including Cynthia's direct ancestors, were small farmers by necessity; times were hard in Indiana for most people, but especially for people of color. As the community grew, settlers developed small and large farms, initially to grow their own food. Over the years, they established their own schools and small industries, and created a large surplus of food and domestic animals for purchase by the City of Terre Haute and neighboring communities.

Generations later, her father, George Norton, a coal miner and breeder of rare hunting dogs, became a school bus driver for Lost Creek Township schools. Her mother, Flossie, was a

homemaker, with responsibility for nine children. The Norton family was an industrious, hardworking family, managing to make ends meet and to educate their children. Cynthia recalls that, in fact, African American families including her own, were sometimes able to feed and assist their rural White neighbors who lived in less fortunate circumstances than they. These were the years of the Great Depression, when everybody suffered.

As the sixth child of nine, Cynthia was said to be the apple of her father's eye. He gave particular attention to her growth and development, recognizing early on that she was exceptional. She had a keen mind along with artistic and musical talent and intelligence, which he encouraged and nurtured. She remembers a time when he sold one of his prized and pedigreed hunting dogs to purchase a player piano to encourage her ability to play. Later, he sold a prized bird dog to purchase a clarinet to ensure Cynthia's participation in the marching band at her school. His dogs represented his source of ready cash.

While serving in France and other European countries during WWI as part of a Black infantry unit, her father was exposed to different human expressions and values, as well as how other families lived and worshipped. As a result, he became keenly aware of the limited opportunities available to people of color within his own country. He dreamed of a more inclusive world at home in Indiana, and his tour of duty in France proved a powerful learning experience. He wanted his children--especially this child--to broaden her horizons and to envision a better life for herself and others. He, therefore, ensured that she was exposed to art, music, and literature, and he taught her to speak his broken French to kindle her desire to speak more than one language.

Cynthia recalls that her mother would often chastise her father for filling her head with high notions, building her hopes too high, and setting her up for disappointment and failure in the world in which they lived.

On the other hand, her mother's practical philosophy was that Cynthia was just a woman and a Black woman at that. She believed that at best, she would have functional roles as a housewife and mother, in American society. Therefore, she must be taught to be a good wife and mother, and to excel in the arts of homemaking and in keeping her husband happy and content with the life they shared. So, Mrs. Norton concentrated on the arts connected with "the good wife," teaching Cynthia how to cook, sew and patch and to clean and care for her family rather than to waste her time and energies on lofty pursuits. "Leave the art and literature to White folks," she often said.

Her dad's response to his very practical wife was that she could focus on further development of the three younger daughters. But, concerning Cynthia, he said, "This one is mine." Cynthia's sisters thought she was adopted, which explained her strange ways and her snooty behavior. But, in fact, all received their early education both in and outside of the home in similar fashion.

For the first six years of her formal schooling, Cynthia attended a racially segregated, one-room schoolhouse in Burnett, a booming rural mining town in Otter Creek, just across from Lost Creek. Her teacher, born and educated in Michigan, single-handedly taught all six grades at this small school with little help. Cynthia credits her teacher, aptly named June Love, with her excitement and love of learning. "Miz" Love awakened within her a growing curiosity and love of books. With only twelve students in the total school, Cynthia was one of three students in her

sixth grade graduating class. Because it was a one-room school, she benefitted from the curriculum being taught to all the upper grades, sometimes simultaneously. She maintains today that the Lost Creek community employed only the best teachers, teachers who were creative, talented and interested in their students' learning. She believes that she could not have gotten a better basic education anywhere than the one she received in Lost Creek.

After grade school, she went on to an integrated but predominately White junior and senior high school and graduated from Otter Creek High School (now defunct). As the only Black student in advanced classes, for the first time, she had to compete with White students for teacher attention and learning opportunities. She did not consider herself less than or inferior to them; she thought of herself no less than equal and most often superior. Everyone was equal, she had been taught by her Lost Creek churches and teachers. They had instilled in her a sense of Black pride and a sense of community. But, racial discrimination and bigotry were very real.

She did well in junior high and senior high school, excelling in English, art, civics and geography, her favorite subjects. This future author loved to write, often winning local essay contests, both school and community sponsored. She also read Shakespeare and other classics in her English classes. She frequented the school library, where she would listen to classical music until she was told to leave.

But, still fresh in her mind after almost 70 years is disappointment over not receiving the coveted Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) award, although she was unanimously recommended for it by her classmates, teachers, and most school administrators as required. Because of her scholastic and artistic prowess, she was confident that she was a sure bet for the award. When it was given instead to a very pretty, blonde, an accomplished fellow student and friend, who had not received the support of the student body or the faculty, she knew that something was amiss. The classmate even told Cynthia she felt that she did not deserve the award and that it came as a surprise to her. When asked why Cynthia had not received the award, one teacher bluntly revealed that the DAR National Board had admonished her that the school award was meant for WHITE GIRLS only. Cynthia was devastated. Despite the obvious slight, she continued to excel in high school; she became the editor of the school newspaper, which she secretly felt was a consolation prize by the faculty. She graduated from Otter Creek in 1946 in the top ten of her class, and was voted "the most likely to succeed" by her peers.

Interestingly, it was her high school civics instructor, Ellis Yaw, a former Jesuit priest, who perhaps unintentionally planted the seed in her mind about becoming an ambassador. In the civics class for seniors, he often emphasized the value and responsibility one has for helping others. She was stirred by his words: "Service to mankind is the highest form of worship of our God." Those words echoed within her and remain with her to this day. Mr. Yaw listed a variety of careers from which one might choose in public service. He ranked teachers, judges and ambassadors at the top of his list of service careers.

Cynthia decided and declared to others, at the tender age of 16, that she had chosen to become an ambassador, as the way in which she would please her God. She later learned that only a few Black men and fewer Black women (exactly four) had ever been named ambassador in the diplomatic history of the United States. It did not deter her.

## Higher Education

After graduation from high school in 1946, Cynthia entered Indiana State University—previously called Indiana State Teachers College—majoring in Art, her passion. She developed a fascination for the Continent of Africa, learning about the murderous civil wars beginning to erupt as new leaders sought to free the people from colonial domination. She remembered her pledge to become an ambassador, and this appeared to be the time to get started.

Kenya was the nation under fire, and she determined to become Ambassador to Kenya. It was a career position for which she was totally unprepared. She hadn't the faintest idea where to begin or what it entailed. Her academic advisors told her that she could prepare to serve in one of Africa's newly independent nations only through acquisition of higher education, and by utilizing the immense, guidance, support system and strategic political strength of the United States government.

Seeking a strategic plan to reach her goal, Cynthia contacted her former high school principal, Herbert Lamb, who told her what she needed was a plan, a long-term plan to meet her goal, and starting from where she currently stood, it might take YEARS to get there, but “all things being equal,” (the title of her memoirs) she could do it. Lamb laid out all he knew about the Foreign Service career—broad and specialized education, foreign language acquisition and travel experience and political support. He said he supported her goal to become an ambassador because he had believed in her “greatness” years earlier, and believed she could succeed.

Together, over a period of days and weeks, Lamb and Cynthia developed a 25 year plan to reach her goal. The plan was rigorously focused on achievements in five-year segments:

Following is the plan in a nutshell as Cynthia relayed it to an interviewer in 1999:

The 25 year plan of action:

\*\*Ten years to complete the Bachelor's and Master's Degrees

\*\*Five years to complete the Doctorate and to join a university teaching faculty

\*\*Five years working in a US Agency international development programs at home and in Africa

\*\*Five years serving in United Nations and American sponsored programs in Africa

\*\*These years would be interspersed with internships, travel around the Continent of Africa, developing language skills and getting known by decision-makers in politics and governments.

*(Taken from Charles Stuart Kennedy March 21, 1999 interview with Ambassador Cynthia Shepard Perry)*

And so it began. At ISU, Cynthia was awarded an academic scholarship and had taken out a student loan to help finance her education. She chose ISU because it was local and affordable, and offered the programs she required. She chose a major in art because she had a passion for art. However, her early tenure at ISU would be short-lived. After completing the first year, her practical-minded mother encouraged her to marry one of her suitors, James Otto Shepard. Otto

came from a leading family in Lost Creek, was a hardworking man of means, owned a shiny new white Chevy, and he was a WW II veteran, just returning from service in Germany. He was also exceptionally good looking and was considered a good catch, and a very responsible man.

Although not quite ready to marry, Cynthia respected her mother's wisdom so she and Otto were married in 1946. Thirteen years her senior, with a ninth grade education (not uncommon in those days), Otto was a traditionalist. He was determined to be in firm control of his wife; he planned the timing of their unborn children and ruled the household. Cynthia dropped out of college (not at his insistence) but not until he promised her mother to return her to university study after the birth of their first child. Soon, the first and only daughter, Donna, was born, and Cynthia settled into her new role as wife and mother.

A few years after leaving her studies, this wife and mother became restless and decided that as soon as her child was in school, she would once again pursue her college education. On the eve of her return to the promised pursuit of her college degree, she discovered that she was expecting her second child. Her dream would once again be deferred. She determined that when Donna and James Jr. were both safely in school, she would return to classes at ISU. However, six years later, on the eve of her enrollment, she found that she was now expecting their third child, Milo.

She now understood that Otto also had a plan, one she had not suspected and over which she had little or no control. These were the days before family planning and birth control became readily available. It had become clear that each time she announced she was returning to school, she would find herself "with child."

### **Sycamore Years**

The same year of the landmark United States Civil Rights Act, 1964, was the year Cynthia decided to once and for all return to college on a full-time basis. Periodically, she had been taking evening courses at the university, but the final semesters had to be done full-time and on campus. Determined to finish, she told her husband that she was returning to university full time, on scholarship if possible, to complete her bachelor's degree in political science.

She had never discussed with him her ultimate goal to become a United States ambassador. Perhaps he somehow knew. But, life sometimes mimics a fairytale. Her husband refused to fund her return to ISU, the Ivory Tower as it was called; but she applied for and received a scholarship from ISU covering her final year's tuition and fees. Determined to find a way to stop her, Otto advised her he would give her no more than twenty-five cents per day, less than her children's daily allowance, a mere pittance even for the mid-60's, to cover bus fare to and from school, child care and other expenses, insisting that her place was in the home, planning the future success of her children. He believed that a man is obligated to educate his children but to educate his wife would be like "fattening frogs for snakes," his words. However, Cynthia was persistent and was able to convince him to allow her return to college on a part-time basis.

He relented but, nine years later, in her final year, she found herself expecting their fourth child—Mark. Determined, she continued the on-campus courses, so large, she was waddling and barely able to fit into the arm chairs, took leave to give birth when the time came and returned to classes six weeks later, to finish what she had started the previous semester. Birth control had set her free.

How did she continue schooling with such little support? She decided to do the most with what she had and accepted the 25 cent per day allowance. At 7 am each morning, she rode to ISU with her husband who worked nearby; she allowed herself ten cents for a cup of coffee at the cafeteria before classes; reserving the remaining 15 cents for bus fare home. Often, her fellow students would join her, paying for her coffee just to talk with her, forming ties with them, solving their problems and amusing them in recollections in her old age—35 at that time.

Her tuition was paid through an ISU academic scholarship and incredibly through loans from her young daughter, who from a much larger allowance from her father, lent her mom money to help out when needed. Cynthia received help from her husband's sister, Henrietta, who enjoyed caring for young Mark, without pay, during school hours. Cynthia was chagrined to learn that Mark, in fact, thought Henrietta was his mother and she was his rude and disgruntled sitter at night.

With a new sense of urgency and persistence--traits that would be hallmarks throughout her life--she completed her four year degree at ISU with a major in political science and a minor in English. After graduation, she enrolled in ISU's Master's Degree Program in English, while fully employed by IBM Corporation.

Of her years at Indiana State University, in a January 17, 2015 interview with the author, she made this statement:

There were good professors at Indiana State, but some of the professors with whom I debated issues related to racial and gender discrimination in our society, seemed to have problems with my being a thinking woman and a Black one at that. The majority of professors, including e.g., Margarita Malm, Psychology and Paul Fowler, Political Science, were supportive and helpful and seemed pleased to have me in their classes, especially in discussion of laws and policies, questions of human rights, equality and other critical issues of the day. Dr. Cloyd Anthony, who chaired the Department at that time was her mentor and for a while, her employer and protector.

Traditionally, few women, if any, majored in political science and the field itself was a man's world--some would say, a White man's world. There were conditions of racial, social and gender inequalities that Cynthia came to know very well during her years at ISU; they arose again and again during her doctoral work at UMass, and in her employment and political career as well. She had not considered the power of gender discrimination which could, at this stage, impede her efforts to reach her major goal.

But despite the naysayers, the lack of support from her husband and lackluster enthusiasm of some of her professors, she excelled in the field and in her life's pursuits and choices in general. She says today,

ISU gave me a good foundation in the field of political science. Political science forced me to think critically, to expand my knowledge, to argue and defend my own political positions; it was

intellectually demanding. Actually, this undergraduate degree program at ISU provided me a broad base on which to build a career, perhaps high school was my best and most lasting introduction to critical thinking, but the rigorous courses at Indiana State solidified my resolve and launched my career. (Interview with author January 2015)

Even though she was on full tuition scholarship, she worked on campus to help make ends meet and to help finance her education. She was hired as the department secretary in the Social Science Division during her sophomore, junior, and part of her senior year of college. The first minority secretary, she was hired by the forward thinking department chair who she also termed her protector, Dr. Cloyd Anthony, who would also hire the first Black American faculty member at ISU, Dr. James Conyers; the first Indian faculty member, Dr. Rathee Rajpal, and the first two Asian faculty members: Dr. Liang Lin Hsiao and his wife, Dr. Kathleen Hsiao, the first female Asian faculty member.

The job of secretary paid enough to allow Cynthia to remain in school. She was more than capable of doing the job having worked five years previously at Nichols Investment Corporation in Terre Haute, in a similar capacity while maintaining her role as dutiful wife and mother. This “woman on fire” worked during the day while her children were in school or with a sitter and then took classes in the evening. She was a hard worker who made excellent grades while managing the job and a family.

The next hurdle in her degree path was student teaching. In the last semester of her senior year, she was given a rare opportunity to do her student teaching at a small historically black university in South Carolina, under the direction of retired ISU professor and Dean, Dr. Dewey Anakin, where he was senior faculty and provost. This student teaching arrangement was most unusual for the School of Education, but the University had confidence in both Dr. Anakin and Cynthia Shepard as a mature student to carry it out. This six-week experiment at Allen successfully stretched into six months.

The 1960s were tumultuous years with student uprisings at a number of colleges and universities throughout the nation, primarily in the South, moving from marching and peaceful demonstrations to disruptive and destructive activities, soon to include Allen University. Cynthia’s student teaching permit was nullified for her alleged support and encouragement of the marches and several students were dismissed for their roles in the protest against Allen University, not for racial discrimination but for lack of quality education, never before experienced at a church-supported school.

Most able students at the University were not, in Cynthia’s opinion, receiving education of the best quality. She wanted the students to experience the serious but strenuous and sometimes grueling type of educational preparation she had received at Indiana State University. On her departure from Allen, Cynthia reached out to President Alan Rankin at ISU for permission to bring ten academically able students from Allen to ISU on financial scholarship to complete their interrupted studies. President Rankin granted permission and arranged for scholarships and financial assistance for those who came.

During 1967-68, she brought 32 students from South Carolina, some of them Gullah, to ISU for further study. Some students adjusted well and graduated on time with their Bachelors from ISU; some returned home to South Carolina, a few joined the Poor Men's March on Washington and never returned; some went on to explore opportunities in other parts of the country.

One exceptionally bright and highly motivated student, Mary Beth Seaward, remained at ISU over the years, earning both her bachelor's and master's degrees in Science and Math. Seaward, is today a Medical Education Specialist, currently in her fiftieth year at Indiana State, preparing future doctors through the medical education program run by Indiana University on ISU's campus. Seaward liked living in Terre Haute from the start but was surprised by the single ethnicity of the majority of students. She had thought that Indiana State was an all-Black college. Cynthia had not told her, she said, that the university was predominately White, and Seaward had not known to ask. All the schools with which she was familiar that had the word "State" in their titles had been all or predominately Black. She, however, adjusted easily to her new environment and reports today that she was readily embraced and treated well by both faculty and students.

All of Cynthia Shepard's hard work paid off and in May of 1968, she graduated from ISU with a bachelor's degree in political science with a minor in English.

Not content, however, to rest on her laurels, Cynthia continued to pursue her dream of becoming an ambassador and fulfilling her destiny. As a stepping stone toward a doctoral degree, she enrolled in ISU's Master's degree program in English, a field where she excelled. Keeping her eyes on the prize, she pursued her master's degree while employed fulltime at IBM Corporation in Terre Haute. Although there were only a few minorities seeking graduate degrees in English at that time, she pursued her degree with the same fervor that characterized her undergraduate studies.

Perhaps, a few at the University did not share her enthusiasm, but Cynthia received encouragement from the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, Dr. Effie Hunt, the first female dean of that college, who noted prior to the start of the semester, Cynthia's determination and ability to excel in English in her undergraduate program, granted her permission to begin the semester late, due to the impending birth of her fourth child, Mark. After the birth and taking a very short maternity leave, Cynthia returned to campus and attempted to join the assigned class that was already in session. To her surprise, the male professor of English refused to allow her to enter his class despite the prior approval from the Dean. He, in fact, adamantly confronted her in the classroom in front of all of her peers, refusing to allow her to take a seat; he cross-examined her demanding to know about her undergraduate academic record, questioning her ability to do the work in "his" class. After a humiliating 10 minutes, Cynthia left the lecture hall much chagrined and never returned.

On the advice and with support from her graduate advisor, Dr. Jessie McCune, this mature, straight "A" student, subsequently enrolled in another English class with a professor, also male, who welcomed her.

Her first semester went well thereafter and she enjoyed her classes. But the rejection by the male professor left her with a bitter taste. Therefore, it was no surprise that in the spring semester of 1968 when the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMASS) came calling, she accepted their invitation to enroll in their new masters/doctoral program. UMASS had embarked upon a unique

program designed to increase the number of scholars with doctoral degrees in education to serve the needs for schools and universities around the country. For a myriad of reasons, there was a severe shortage of qualified doctorates, in the early 1970s in American educational institutions, without which universities could not qualify to offer the advanced professional degree.

The plan at the University of Massachusetts in 1967 was to recruit 30 of the brightest students from around the country-- 10 of whom would be Black men and women—all expenses paid, and to educate them through the doctoral program. They would in turn fill the gaps in the shortage of doctorates needed to serve higher education institutions around the country.

Years earlier at Indiana State University, Cynthia had caught the attention of a professor, Dr. Daniel Jordan, a behavioral scientist, teaching an undergraduate course in ethics. He was fascinated and impressed with a paper Cynthia had written for one of his courses at ISU. The premise of her paper was that Black preachers, in the years following emancipation, purposely dissuaded Black students from pursuing higher education, because “it created enmity with God”, which resulted in docility and reluctance to challenge or resist infringements under the Black Codes and illegal activities of the KKK. Dr. Jordan had expressed interest in publishing the paper in the *World View Magazine*, but requested that she add 2,500 words. In so doing, however, her extended research findings refuted her thesis and she refused to allow its publication.

Dr. Jordan, in the meantime, joined the faculty of Education at UMASS Amherst, and remembering Cynthia’s enthusiasm for research and the integrity she exhibited in the recall of her paper, recommended her-- the only student from Indiana--for admission to the doctoral program at Amherst. In part due to the ISU experience and Dr. Jordan’s new level of influence, she was accepted into the doctoral program, and awarded a full scholarship and living expenses. Dan Jordan, now deceased, continued to influence changes in the trajectory of her life toward reaching her goal.

When she announced to her husband that she had accepted this opportunity to go to UMASS, without anger or argument, he simply demanded a divorce. Shocked, she was confronted with a tough choice when she realized that Otto not only did not share her dream of earning a doctorate but was vehemently opposed to her going forward with educational pursuits. She did actually file for divorce, but without telling him, did not process it for three years, on the completion of her studies.

Discussing her decision many years later with this author, she said that she does not regret pursuing her dreams, but does regret divorcing her husband who was a good father and caring husband. In retrospect, she felt that perhaps she might have done things differently.

### **University of Massachusetts and Beyond**

Cynthia became one of 30 students, nationally recruited by UMass Amherst, for a doctoral program dedicated to serve the State of Massachusetts and beyond. She was an oddity, the only one of the 10 Black students widely recruited for this program to go into international education, rather than urban education. She was pushed and highly encouraged by her UMass advisors to consider going into urban education rather than international education.

One professor stated, “Why would you, an honor student with a great future ahead of you want to go into international education when cities in this country are burning? Wouldn’t you want to become a highly productive, promoter of change in the cities through urban education?” She told him that her goal in life had always been to become an ambassador, which completely “floored” him; he next questioned why she had chosen Education as a major, rather than Political Science. She explained that she had actually applied to the School of Law, and thought she actually had been accepted into International Law. When she arrived on campus, she discovered the scholarship was in International Education, so she decided to go with the money, believing as a graduate of UMASS--and knowing that few ambassadors actually held doctoral degrees— she could still reach her goal through this higher education program. She was right.

She believes that her peers in International Education, all White men—all but one a former Peace Corps Volunteer--initially had a problem with her, more for being a woman than being Black. She says that, “It was challenging for me at UMass; I soon realized I was on my own.” However, with a sense of purpose and ability to keep her eyes on the prize, she won their respect, learning much from them, and earning her doctorate within three years, a remarkable feat for anyone.

Today, she credits Indiana State University with giving her a strong foundation in both Political Science and English, instilling within her a strong ethical character--that enabled her to make good choices, to function, to successfully compete for what she gained and to complete all requirements for the doctoral degree in Education at UMASS. In 1971, she completed all requirements with a specialization in international education, and graduated with her class in 1972.

On one of her recruitment visits to Washington D.C., Cynthia met her future husband, Dr. James O. Perry, a widower with two children and a renowned professor at Texas Southern University. She had in fact first met him in Indiana when she was 16 years old but had not seen or heard from him in 24 years. She acknowledges that he was her first boyfriend, not her lover. They married one year later and she joined him as a faculty member at Texas Southern University in 1971.

Three years later, in 1973, UNESCO Paris recruited her for a top position as Director of their program in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia—this was a part of her 25 year plan. She was reluctant to repeat failures of her past in her haste to reach her diplomatic goal. James did not forbid her, however, to accept the position so vital to her goal—he refused to accompany her. After much forethought, she replied to UNESCO informing them she was newly married which conflicted with the posting; however, her husband was equally qualified and interested in working abroad, giving them full information on his PhD in Math/Science, and several years of university teaching experience, requesting that they consider hiring him instead, and she would accompany him without salary—a two for one exchange (He never knew). They did hire him and this Sycamore accompanied her husband to Nairobi, Kenya, for a three year stint with UNESCO at the University of Nairobi. While there, not sitting on her laurels, she taught ethics at U/Nairobi and contracted with other UN and US agencies as outlined in her goal, learned to speak Swahili (another goal) while continuing to prepare for the higher diplomatic role. She also trained new Peace Corps paramedic volunteers, and served as consultant to USIS in Zambia, Kenya, and Nigeria. Two years later in 1976, she became the staff development officer at the UN Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Abba, Ethiopia. After serving in this position for two additional

years, she returned to Texas Southern University as Associate Professor in the School of Education.

### **Life as an Ambassador and Beyond**

Because of her work in the field of international affairs and international education and because of her passion and hard work, Cynthia had become a member of the Republican party, developing a stellar reputation and making numerous friends and contacts around the globe. She served for four years as Chief of the Education and Human Resources Division in the Africa Bureau of the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, 1982-1986; where she caught the attention of the White House.

I was down in South Africa at the home of a friend, designing a program for the training of new lawyers when I received a telephone call from President Reagan--he wasn't announced—he was just there—when I picked up the phone. He asked, Cynthia, I've heard so many good things about you and your work in Africa. I'm calling to ask if you would serve as my ambassador to Sierra Leone.

I was so stunned and shocked, I thought I would faint, Yes, Mr. President, I would be so honored. Thank you, Mr. President. I breathed. And, then I danced the happy dance for the next two hours.

President Ronald Reagan, appointed her United States Ambassador to Sierra Leone, 1986-1989, becoming the fourth Black woman in the United States to be named to this diplomatic position. She was subsequently appointed ambassador to Burundi by President George H. Bush, a position she held from 1989 to 1993. Upon leaving her Burundi ambassadorship in 1993, she returned initially to her position at Texas Southern University, leaving a few years later to join the private sector with FCA Investment Corporation, continuing her focus on African development. In 2001, she was appointed Executive Director of the African Development Bank by President George W. Bush, from which she retired in 2007 at the age of 79. Today, at 88, she serves as Honorary Consul of Rwanda in Houston's Consular Corps.

She says that her six years as the Executive Director of the African Development Bank, gave her tremendous responsibility and pleasure, for funding education and development projects, for the digging of wells and developing water delivery systems, increasing funding and availability of health care especially for women and children, increasing access to quality health programs, supporting micro lending projects for small start-up loans, loans especially geared toward women and for analyzing requests from governments and granting huge loan requests for governmental projects such as schools, infrastructure, and poverty reduction projects throughout the Africa Region.

In review of her life's achievements, Ambassador Cynthia Shepard Perry says service to the African Development Bank was the epitome of her choice at the age of 16 to become an

Ambassador as her life's career goal. At that time, she vowed and committed herself to serve humanity as stressed by her teacher, Ellis Yaw. It was the greatest job she ever had, achieving in full measure her goal to serve humanity as the highest form of worship. When she retired from the African Development Bank in 2008, she felt she had served as Ambassador to all 53 nations on the Continent of Africa.

## **Retirement and Beyond**

In 2006, Ambassador Perry lost her "Prince Consort" Dr. James Olden Perry, to Parkinson's disease. He died peacefully in Tunisia, a country in Africa that he dearly loved. Her first husband, James Otto Shepard, with whom she had kept peace over the years, passed away while visiting his daughter in Houston in 2003. Both husbands are buried in Stewart Lawn Cemetery in Lost Creek near Terre Haute, Indiana, just a few paces from each other.

She returned to Houston in 2008, serving as Honorary Consul General of Rwanda, appointed by President Paul Kagame, and confirmed by the United States Department of State, in a non-salaried honorary position. On her return in 2015, to Rwanda, she was honored by President Paul Kagame and the government of Rwanda for her services to Rwanda and the Continent of Africa.

Now semi-retired, in addition to her duties as Honorary Consul General of Rwanda, she also spends her time counseling business men and women interested in doing business abroad, or representing foreign investors wishing to do business in Houston, speaking engagements, gardening, and oil painting large African landscapes. She is considered a gifted visual artist in oil and maintains a virtual museum of her artwork and memorabilia in her home in Manvel.

Her memoirs published in 2001, entitled, *All Things Being Equal: One Woman's Journey* are currently being reprinted, the third time in the past 15 years. The hardback version of the book was reprinted in Ethiopia in 19 May 2001.

In 2015, she was the guest speaker at the Indiana State University Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Dinner. This remarkable 88-year-old woman, gave a spellbinding, 90 minute presentation. In her speech, she discussed elements of her life and the need to give back to our local communities, especially to Lost Creek where her eldest son, James, and his family currently live. On her visit to Terre Haute in January 2015, she also visited the African American mural at Terre Haute North High School by a local artist, John Holliman, on which she is prominently portrayed along with other significant Black leaders from the Vigo County area. This proud Sycamore is honored to interview and to share her life's story as a Sycamore.

Last year, in a January 16, 2015 interview with the author, she stated that this may be her last official trip to the region, "at 87 years old, I am too old now. I am tired." In truth, tired is probably a word that is not even in her vocabulary. In fact, it would appear as if the word "tired" is foreign to her as later that year she took a ten day pilgrimage to Israel and at this writing, is preparing for a trip to Namibia to visit her son, Dr. Mark Shepard and his family. His actions in the field of public health seem to mirror his mother's dedication in service to others.

Also, her eldest son James and his wife, Kathy, and their youngest son, Scott, continue to live in Lost Creek, Indiana and she visits them whenever she can.

## **Conclusion**

Ambassador Dr. Cynthia Shepard Perry, grew up in a small rural community in Indiana but had larger than life dreams to serve the world. Her life was greatly influenced by her father, a veteran of World War I, serving in France. He wanted his daughter to see the world as he had seen it and experienced it: a world and a people so much broader than most would ever know. He believed that his daughter inherited her unique intelligence and talents from her ancestors in the Lost Creek Settlement near Terre Haute where she was born. She lived up to the ideals of service that her high school teacher, Mr. Ellis Yaw, discussed so passionately. Service to humanity became synonymous to her life's work, and in so doing, this Sycamore fulfilled her destiny of great achievement.

In 2001, she published her memoirs entitled *All Things Being Equal: One Woman's Journey*. Today, she continues to counsel young aspiring students and four generations of her children and grandchildren on setting high goals, with a long term plan to reach them. To satisfy her soul, she writes, plays her baby grand piano and paints large oil canvasses primarily of African motifs and landscapes.

As in the immortal words of singer James Cleveland, at 88, she is "no ways tired."

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