Current students benefit from legacy of Nevada’s first black female graduate

At a time when segregation still governed American life, Stella Mason Parson ’52 (English) became the first black woman to graduate from the University. The daughter of a sharecropper, Mason molded a life that included a 33-year teaching career in Clark County, three children who earned their own degrees, an elementary school named for her and her late husband, Claude, and a 2002 University of Nevada, Reno President’s Medal for her accomplishments.

Parson arrived on campus in 1948 with the help of a scholarship from the Las Vegas chapter of the American Association of University Women. In 2002, she paid tribute to the scholarship support that made her education possible by creating the Stella Mason Parson Scholarship Endowment for women of African-American descent.

The life she created for herself in Nevada is far from her early life in Louisiana, where her parents were sharecroppers on a plantation. The plantation owner would let her parents work on the property, in-theory giving them a share of the profits in return. But the dishonesty of the plantation owner kept them perpetually indebted to him, and eventually, the family was forced to flee.

Parson migrated West with her father as a young girl, eventually settling in Las Vegas and becoming the first in her family to graduate from high school. After graduation, Parson took a job as a maid. Her employer was so impressed with Parson’s tireless work ethic that she arranged for the AAUW to offer Parson a scholarship to Nevada. She became the first black woman to attend a university in the state.

With racial segregation still in play, Parson was not allowed to have a roommate or eat in restaurants with her peers. There had never been a black student-teacher in the area either, so special arrangements had to be made when it was time for her to complete her student teaching.

Since she was poor, Parson spent the northern Nevada winters without a coat or a bedspread. She worked at the campus cafeteria steam tables and as a domestic on weekends to cover her living expenses.

Despite these challenges, Parson graduated and excelled personally and professionally, with the Claude and Stella Parson Elementary School named in her honor. After retirement, Parson enrolled in the marriage and family therapy master’s program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In 1986, she earned her master’s degree in counseling at age 59.

Parson also began a legacy of higher education for black women in her own family, which includes her daughters, Jacqueline Parson-Barker ’77 (elementary education) and Naida Parson ’89Ph.D. (psychology), and her granddaughter, Latoysia Parson-Brass ’02 (psychology).

Her legacy also continues with the many Nevada students she’s helped over the past decade. Tia Brass, Class of 2015, says receiving the scholarship was divine timing since her family was struggling financially.

“I was so shocked I couldn’t believe my eyes,” says Brass, a community health sciences freshman and member of Sisters on a Move, a campus group focused on volunteerism and sisterhood. “I immediately began thanking God and proceeded to call my mom. She was so happy and explained that the scholarship couldn’t have come at a better time.”

Like Parson in 1948, Brass is now able to attend the University with her tuition covered.

“I can focus more on my school work, rather than worrying about how my parents are going to pay for tuition and other things I need for school,” Brass says. “I’m very thankful to have received this scholarship. I can’t express my gratitude enough.”

—Roseann Keegan

Student Tia Brass, Class of 2015, is a recipient of the Stella Mason Parson Scholarship Endowment, a scholarship for black women established by the University’s first black female graduate.