

# Talk from Kent State professor kicks off Women's History Month at Mount Union

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The Review

Joanne Kilgour Dowdy has been reminded of some of the areas of life she doesn't fit into ever since she moved to the U.S. from Trinidad; while learning at the same time what was expected of her in the many roles she has filled



DOWDY

during the past 28 years she has been here. All of this categorizing, this belonging and not belonging, has taught her there is a larger group she fits perfectly into — that of the human race.

During a talk Dowdy gave at Mount Union Theatre to kick off Women's History Month on Thursday, she told the roughly 160 people present that she was speaking to them as a woman; as a black woman originally from Trinidad, who has lived in five U.S. states, both on the east coast and in the south; as one of the 1.5 percent of black females with a Ph.D.; as a full professional woman; as a single person with no children and no companion.

"I am all those things, and I am a dancer, actor, artist and spiritual person housed inside this body here today with you," she said.

During her talk, she recounted the story of her life thus far, and she advised young women to take the advice of experienced elders they make friendships with along their way, as she has done more than once.

She was raised in Trinidad with a Christian upbringing and education, and began studying Hindu scripture, at the suggestion of her older brother, three years after arriving in New York City to study at Juilliard, where she transferred from a college she was attending in Boston.

While attending Juilliard and studying drama and music, which was the plan of her parents and a learned family friend, she felt her life was on the wrong track.

"I am still in the U.S.A. 28 years later, and to say I got off on the wrong exit on the highway of life would be remiss," Dowdy said, "because my professional career was carefully mapped out by my teachers who believed in my talent.

"Still, I felt at the time there was something missing from my experience at Juilliard and I began my long journey to filling that hole. I call it spiritual growth. It was a spiritual yearning driving me, but I didn't know it at the time."

She took the advice of one of her Hindu instructors and applied for graduate school at a teacher's college at Columbia University, also in NYC. She finished her graduate

work in one year and taught in Harlem for another year.

"A train ride uptown (to Harlem) changed my view of myself, of New York and of my mission in the world as an artist and a teacher," Dowdy said.

Dowdy married after completing her first year of teaching and moved to North Carolina, starting yet another very different chapter in her life.

"After being an international student, I began filling the role of a wife and mother in the U.S. and as a black female in the southern portion of the U.S.A., which was no small undertaking. And many people always pointed out I was not a native there. I have come to realize the country of my birth is only one aspect of a person's identity. Male, female, rich, poor, immigrant or native, these are all just categories. We are essentially the same — members of the human race.

"I realized I wasn't going to become a southerner or to become a black American. And, whether I wanted to forget Trinidad or not, I had to face I may be the only person from Trinidad those people in North Carolina may ever meet ... These lessons have also shaped my life. And, my role as a non-American, non-southern, non-black American helped me see black women in the U.S. have a path to becoming respectable here."

Dowdy relocated to Georgia and continued to live and work there for four years.

"I became a resident, non-black American wife, mother and activist while I worked in Georgia. I also received a divorce there and became a full-time writer and educator. My students there taught me to dig deep into my toolbox of communication skills to convince them I cared about their success," Dowdy admitted.

Dowdy said most dreams don't pan out the way we design them in our minds. To her surprise, she found mobility in her divorce and found it carried no scar for those who embraced her.

She said she became an active member of life where she chose to live, love and learn. New opportunities appeared in her life and she was offered a book deal.

"Now, I was learning to live up the expectations my life had set up for me," she added. She again relocated, and currently teaching in the Midwest, she instructs mainly white, Christian students with a Midwest origin. These students have taught her they are also Irish, German, Italian and Appalachian, to name only a few of their backgrounds, she said, and many are the first in their family to attend college. She identifies with them as first-timers, she noted.

"We establish a family of

sorts, by establishing similarities outside of physical characteristics and obvious statistics," Dowdy told her audience. "I have learned I must look beyond outer characteristics when I am in a room with others. I am not sure yet what I will say later of the Midwest chapter in my life book. Things take on a different meaning as I step back from them."

Dowdy wrapped up her talk by giving her mainly female audience another piece of advice. "Make dreams, and have the courage to go out and find people who hear your

heart when you talk about your ideals. Keep service as a goal, and take the time to thank others and you'll find yourself in places where you are nourished and cared for so you can follow your life path."

Dowdy closed by saying she now believes relationships outlast any physical boundaries. "Good relationships are a testament to what our souls need, with no boundaries or origin, gender or physical characteristics to limit them."

Dowdy is the author of seven books, with an eighth soon to be published. Her titles include "Ph.D. Stories:

Conversations With My Sisters" and "In the Public Eye."

Dowdy is a professor of teaching, leadership and curriculum studies at Kent State University. She received the 2009 American Educational Research Association Narrative and Research Special Interest Group's Outstanding Book Award for "Ph. D. Stories: Conversations With My Sisters." The book is a collection of interviews with female African-American professors in northeast Ohio detailing their experiences in obtaining a Ph.D. and working in academia.