



Wanda Herndon, a senior vice president of the Seattle-based Starbucks coffee house chain, was the guest speaker at Saturday's Mott Community College graduation ceremony.

Starbucks exec perks up dreams

MCC speaker tells
grads of Flint roots

By Shena Abercrombie
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FLINT — Coffee company executive Wanda Herndon shared a cup of encouragement with Mott Community College graduates Saturday at the IMA Sports Arena.

Herndon, senior vice president of worldwide public affairs at Seattle-based Starbucks Corp., was the guest speaker at the commencement ceremony.

"I can't believe that I'm standing here before a commencement audience, let alone an audience this large," Herndon said. "The fact that I'm standing here today is magical."

Avon Burns, Herndon's childhood friend who heads the MCC criminal justice program, asked her to speak at graduation.

Herndon may be at the top of the international business ladder now, but her roots can be traced to a south Flint neighborhood, where her mother worked in housekeeping at Hurley Medical Center and her father worked for General Motors.

The 1970 Flint Southwestern High School graduate and first-generation college student told students how she worked for two summers and winters alongside her mother in the housekeeping department to help pay her college tuition.

"As I pursued my dreams, I would never forget where I came from on my way to something greater," she said "My parents had more common sense than money for education. They were smart enough to instill in me the will to achieve."

And she did.

She earned bachelor and master's degrees in journalism at Michigan State University, then spent more than 10 years at Dow Chemical Co. in Midland, where she made history in 1978 as the first black professional the company hired.

In 1990, she moved to DuPont, where she advised the chairman on internal communications, but then Starbucks beckoned, where she became vice president of communications and public affairs in 1995.

Herndon was promoted to her

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has taken Wanda Herndon from being a first-generation college student from south Flint to being Starbucks Coffee Co.'s vice president of worldwide public affairs.

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from the Flint area who want to major in journalism at Michigan State University, her alma mater.

Herndon will share some of her story in May as the MCC commencement speaker, thanks to prompting from Burns.

"Wanda and others have been overlooked in terms of painting positive pictures of an African-American raised in this community," said Burns, 51.

Herndon and Burns have known each other since the '60s, when they went from playground swings to the yearbook pages at Southwestern High School, active in everything from the orchestra to Latin Club.

"We were very busy," Herndon said. "There were five of us: Pam Banks-McKeeon, Vel Woods, Avon Larraign Burns and Thressa Horton. We all ran around together. We were taught there was nothing we couldn't do."

That image of a skinny girl in a cheerleading uniform, with feet firmly planted in front of her desk and a determined look on her face, was Marcia Strong's first impression of Herndon when she taught journalism at Southwestern.

"She had a lot of energy and a ton of talent," said Strong, 58, now township manager in Brighton Township.

"I knew she'd be successful, (but) at the

time she graduated in 1970, it would've been absolutely unheard of for a girl to dream of being vice president of an international corporation. ... It's absolutely awesome."

Herndon's father moved the family to Flint from Georgia in 1953, when she was 1.

Her parents wanted a life for their three children beyond the blue-collar world of Flint's factories. So they sent her to Baker College while she was still in high school to learn to type.

In her senior year, Strong took Herndon to tour the MSU campus and introduced her to George Hough, the director of the journalism school.

"At age 17, I ended up forming a relationship with George Hough," Herndon said. "I'd send my high school papers to MSU, and he'd critique them and send them back."

She earned bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism and later worked for more than 10 years at Dow Chemical Co. in Midland, where she edited the company's bimonthly employee publication and anchored the in-house corporate video news program.

"I was given every opportunity in the world there," she said. "(If a door opens), I'm knocking it down. You don't know if you'll have that opportunity tomorrow."

She moved to DuPont in 1990, where she advised the chairman on internal communications, and then to Starbucks as vice president of communications and public

affairs in 1995. She was promoted to her current post the next year.

Herndon's been listed as one of the 12 leading blacks in public relations by PR Week magazine. And in October, MSU selected her to receive its Distinguished Alumni Award.

"She has a tremendous impact on students," said Stephen Lacy, director of MSU's School of Journalism. "I know students who went into that field because they heard Wanda talk. She does more than speak to classes — she'll sit down and talk with students. It helps give (students) confidence that they can do that."

Herndon said it's simply her turn to give back, as shown by the scholarship she's setting up.

"I think we owe it to the generations before us to bring other folks along," she said. "I've stood on their shoulders. So much has been given to me, I wanted to do something for someone else. I hate to see someone else with aspirations and no funds."

Herndon, who has never married, said she stays grounded by keeping in touch with friends and talking daily to her father and a sister in Saginaw.

"I'm a living example of what you can do if you just believe and if somebody else believes in you," she said. "I've been given a lot of opportunities. I tried not to disappoint. I'm living a great life."

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