



MARQUETTE’S EOP MAY BE **JUDGED** A SUCCESS, **BUT MORE IS NEEDED**

For **Brittany Grayson, L’11**, Marquette University’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) meant “immediate family, unconditional family, unconditional family forever.”

Joe Donald, L’88, says that EOP, as it is popularly called, changed the trajectory of his life.

But at a program at Marquette’s Alumni Memorial Union in February, marking the fiftieth anniversary of EOP, Donald followed his praise by saying, “I’m concerned because I don’t think we’re so much further from where we were in 1969.” That comment drew audience applause.

Yes, the story of EOP is one of success and achievement for a long list of Marquette students, the large majority of them low-income, minority, and the first in their families to go to college. Two examples are Grayson, now a Milwaukee County circuit judge, and Donald, now a Wisconsin Court of Appeals judge. Both got undergraduate degrees at Marquette and then graduated from Marquette Law School.

But the success of EOP is paired with a lot of concern for the overall picture of how many young people who fit EOP’s mission are making it to and through college. That’s the case at Marquette. It’s the case nationwide.

One of the speakers at the EOP celebration was Maureen Hoyler, L’79. She was involved in the founding of EOP and then in expanding its work from Marquette to more than 1,000 campuses nationwide through an organization, the Council for Opportunity in Education, which provides support services and advocacy for programs such as EOP. Hoyler has been president of the council since 2013.

Before an audience of about 150, Hoyler said opportunities for low-income students to attend Marquette had not expanded over the years as much as they should have. “We have to figure out a way [to change] that,” she said.

“[I]mmediate family, unconditional family, unconditional family forever.”

—Brittany Grayson on what the EOP meant to her

Sande Robinson, who was associate director of the EOP from 1974 to 2010, acknowledges the need for broader success. But she sees the positive side. In an interview, she said that the vision of Arnold Mitchem, a key figure in the history of the program, was to create a corps of African-American leaders in Milwaukee. “Darn if that hasn’t happened,” she said. “We’ve done a lot of good.”

Robinson named some of the most prominent EOP alumni. Gwen Moore, who has represented Milwaukee in the U.S. House of Representatives since 2005, was one of the first participants. Ashanti Hamilton, former president of the Milwaukee Common Council; Willie Hines, another former president of the Milwaukee Common Council; Milwaukee County circuit judges Pedro Colón and Carl Ashley—all these and others were part of EOP in their Marquette days.

Judge Donald and Judge Grayson both gave credit to the EOP in recent investiture ceremonies when they began new judicial duties.

Joe Donald: “I Have Had Tremendous Good Fortune”

Joe Donald’s family lived in the Merrill Park neighborhood of Milwaukee when he was young. His mother provided child care and domestic work for one of Milwaukee’s most prominent families, the Cudahys. Joe Donald and his siblings would accompany her sometimes in going from their low-income neighborhood to the Cudahy house on Lake Drive. “It was like going to a completely different world,” he recalled.

While Donald was in high school, the family lived in the coach house adjacent to the Cudahy home. He attended and graduated from Shorewood High School. He became friends with children from families that were much more well-to-do, some of whom remain friends to this day, and he got to know some of the people who were then Milwaukee’s most influential business and civic leaders because he did yard work at their homes. The result was a series of connections that helped him at important points in his life.

On the positive side, Donald said, “I met some amazing people who took an interest in me.” He said that his family, his teachers, and people he got to know wanted a good future for him. “It felt like people were expecting something of me,” he said.

But that came with stresses for him, especially as someone who was often the only black youth in a school or social setting. “I always had to be sure I was being completely respectful,” he said. He knew he couldn’t do what other kids could do. “Many times, you’re confronted with being the representative of the race. It was a lot of pressure on a kid.”

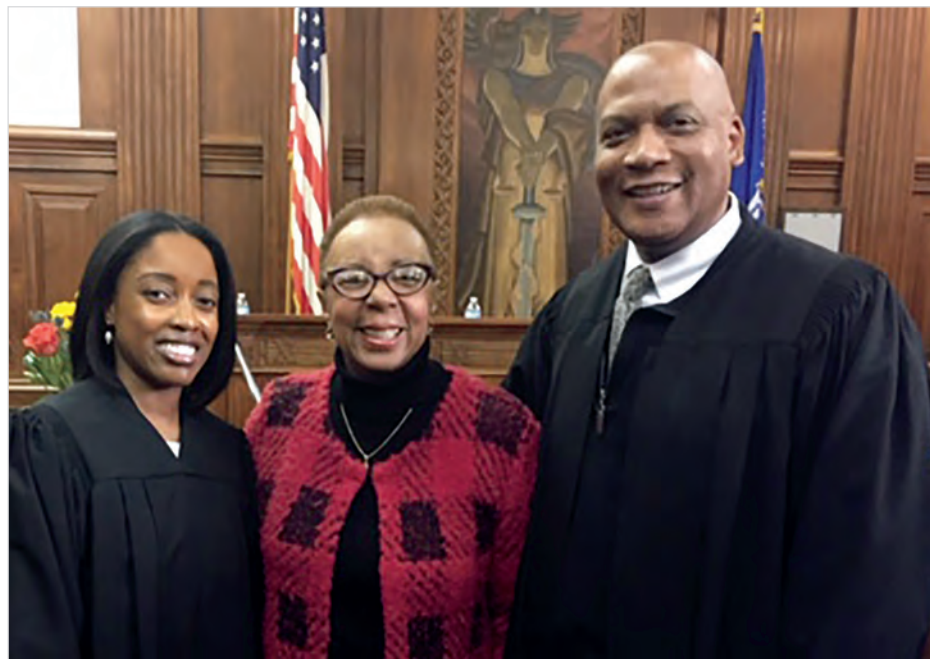
Overall, though, “my whole life, I have had tremendous good fortune,” Donald says.

When Donald was enrolling at Marquette, his sister told him to join EOP. He did. His advisor was Howard Fuller, who went on to become one of Milwaukee’s most influential education leaders. “I’m still tasting shoe leather from Howard’s kick” figuratively to his rear end, Donald said at the EOP anniversary program. “It changed the trajectory of my life.” He said the EOP gave him support on all fronts.

Graduation from college was followed by a move to Boston, where he worked in the business world, then a return to Milwaukee to go to Marquette Law School, a job as a clerk for a long-time Milwaukee judge, Victor Manian, and a position in the Milwaukee city attorney’s office. In

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Brittany Grayson, Sande Robinson, and Joe Donald

“It changed the trajectory of my life.”

—Joe Donald
on the influence of EOP

1996, Donald, then 37, was appointed by Gov. Tommy Thompson to be a circuit judge.

Through advocacy for creating a drug court and other steps, Donald said he tried to convey to people who came before him as a judge the message that the deck wasn't stacked against them. Now, he said, “when I read briefs, I actually see the people, and I know what they're going through.” He added, “I've seen how people of privilege are treated and how people without are treated.”

Donald is reading a lot of briefs these days. In 2019, Gov. Tony Evers appointed him to the Wisconsin Court of Appeals in Milwaukee.

Now 61, Donald describes himself as a kid who grew up in the central city with a lot of self-doubt and few dreams of big things. “I couldn't be happier” with the way things have turned out.

Brittany Grayson: Jumping Hurdles, Literally and Figuratively

The Marquette EOP offered an opportunity to Brittany Grayson that might seem surprising: her first real chance to develop friendships at school with other students of color.

Grayson grew up with her mother, her grandmother, and a cousin in a townhouse in the Milwaukee suburb of Brookfield. She went to St. John Vianney Catholic School in Brookfield and Catholic Memorial High School in nearby Waukesha. Both were close to all white. Grayson remembers a boy in kindergarten cutting in front of her at a water fountain and calling her by a racial epithet. “At the time, I didn't even know what it meant,” she said, “but I would develop a really thick skin.”

She has jumped a lot of hurdles since then—including actual hurdles as a track star in high school. Her name is still on the list of the fastest times in hurdle events in Wisconsin high school history.

But, she said, “By the time I got to Marquette, I was comfortable being in spaces where I was one of the few.” That made it all the more important that EOP staff and students became “like family to me.”

“It was my first experience being surrounded by other kids of color,” she said. The EOP office was a gathering place for students in the program, and the staff went to “extraordinary lengths” to make sure students, including her, stayed on track in school.

During her senior year in college, Grayson got a part-time job at the Chudnow Law Offices, then located just a few blocks from campus. Dan Chudnow became a friend and mentor to her. That helped pave her path to the Law School. “I found it challenging,” she said. But she stuck with it.

Participation as a law student in the Law School's mediation clinic and Restorative Justice Initiative, both led by Professor Janine Geske, was a turning point for Grayson. She said that she learned from the great empathy Geske showed people. “That put the humanity side in the law,” Grayson said.

Grayson worked for six-plus years as an assistant district attorney for Milwaukee County. In 2019, she was appointed by Gov. Evers to be a circuit judge in Milwaukee.

Now 34, Grayson is serving in the juvenile courts. Being on the bench “definitely feels surreal.” At the same time, she said, “it feels right—this is what I'm supposed to be doing.” She added, “I've always felt a big sense of responsibility to give back.”

More Is Needed, Speakers Say

Federal funding is available nationally for students in programs such as EOP, but getting additional funding from universities themselves has become harder amid current realities, Hoyler said at the EOP celebration.

Donald said that it was important to him when he was a student that there was funding to support living on campus. He advocated a return to a level of funding that would permit that approach and enable more students to participate. He said he was convinced there are a lot of kids out there now like he was then, with the same potential for success.

Hoyler called for a doubling of black enrollment at Marquette and strengthening the connections between the campus and the African-American and Latino communities in Milwaukee.

Donald told the audience, “I think if we do take that stand, we can do something.” ■