



Tough Assignment

Scandal-ridden and \$27 million in debt, Morris Brown College is turning to veteran educator Stanley Pritchett.

AS A KID GROWING UP in Atlanta, Stanley Pritchett participated in “Little Mr. Morris Brown College” pageants—but never won. As a teenager, he turned down a football scholarship to the 127-year-old Atlanta college, choosing instead to attend Albany State. But clearly it was meant for Pritchett to find his way back to the only historically black college in Georgia founded by African Americans. As acting president, he is now charged with turning around the school that faced near extinction five years ago in the aftermath of a financial scandal. “[2006] was the first phase of restoring the college,” says Pritchett. “Morris Brown was in the ICU, now I’m trying to stabilize it.”

Morris Brown, founded in 1881 by former slaves, is the storied school that produced late civil rights leader Hosea Williams, former Atlanta city councilman Derrick Boazman, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author James Alan McPherson. Coretta Scott King once taught in the music department. Its campus served as a backdrop for recent coming-of-age films *Drumline* and *Stomp the Yard*. Atlanta-based Grammy-winning rap duo OutKast even named a song after it—and featured the school’s marching band in the mix.

Morris Brown’s rich history and reputation for helping African American students—many of whom flourished with the personal attention and extra support

provided by the small private college known for its liberal enrollment policy—all but came to a halt in the wake of an embezzlement scandal that ended in 2006 with its former president, Dolores Cross, pleading guilty to federal charges. Cross and Parvesh Singh, its former director of financial aid, were indicted on thirty-four counts in 2004, charged with applying for and receiving millions of dollars in federal loans and grants in the names of former students and students who did not actually attend the school.

U.S. Attorney David Nahmias described Singh’s and Cross’s actions as a “misguided and ultimately criminal effort” to “keep Morris Brown afloat.” Cross pleaded guilty in May 2006, and the judge ordered her to pay nearly \$17,000 in restitution and fines. She also received probation, was required to serve twelve months of home confinement, and put in 500 hours of community service. Singh was ordered to pay just under \$9,000 in restitution and fines and sentenced to five years of probation and eighteen months of home confinement.

Now, the school that in its heyday boasted more than thirty majors and nearly 3,000 students has shrunk to less than a handful of majors and an enrollment smaller than most daycare centers. Morris Brown was stripped of its accreditation status from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), essentially nullifying any degrees earned at the institution and making enrolled students ineligible for federal financial aid. No accreditation also means that, though the school is still located in the Atlanta University Center (the world’s largest consortium of historically black colleges and universities), students may no longer cross-study with AUC institutions such as Clark Atlanta University, the Interdenominational Theological Center, and Morehouse and Spelman colleges. Finally, it means an end to scholarship money from the United Negro College Fund.

Faced with this reality, Pritchett, an educator for more than thirty-five years, isn’t flinching—even though he’s never

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before served as a college president. The former high school principal, who most recently retired as deputy superintendent of administration and business affairs for DeKalb County Schools, insists he’s equipped to handle the challenge. “I could probably be somewhere else making a lot more money as a consultant, but I’m lit with passion for Morris Brown College,” says Pritchett, who began as a consultant for Morris Brown in 2006 and then headed its management team before the board appointed him to fill the post left by former president Samuel Jolley, who had briefly returned to help the college during the Cross and Singh scandal.

Pritchett will have to draw on all that passion. Morris Brown is \$27 million in debt, has a student body of just fifty-two, and has only seven full-time and four part-time faculty members. The school now offers only two degree programs (business administration and organizational management and leadership). Many of its buildings are vacant, and it will likely be year’s end before school leaders can expect to *submit* a reaccreditation application detailing a plan as to how it can feasibly honor its outstanding debts (candidacy status could restore critical financial aid for qualified students).

Pritchett doesn’t gloss over the sobering truth, but he chooses to focus on the positives, as does board of trustees chairman Reverend William P. DeVeaux, bishop of the Sixth District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which oversees the school. They point out, for example, that alumni giving is at an all-time high; in the last seven months of 2007, former students donated \$900,000, and fundraisers such as

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the Walk-A-Thon and the Legacy Awards Gala raised an additional \$120,000. In January, campus dining returned to the Hickman Student Center. And more importantly, Pritchett notes, the school now meets all but the *financial* requirements needed for reaccreditation; he says the college's debt is offset by property values exceeding \$130 million. "There are a lot of campus facilities that are not in use, and we see this as a prime opportunity for us to partner with an entity in the areas of property development," says Pritchett of the school's thirty-four-acre campus on prime real estate near the Georgia Dome. "We believe there's potential to utilize portions of the campus for a mixed-use development that could include housing, retail, doctors offices, or what have you."

Hand-picked board of trustees members such as Darryl Berry, co-owner, executive vice president, and COO of the company that owns Mrs. Winner's Chicken and Biscuits restaurants, and William "Sonny" Walker, a former King Center COO and U.S. Community Service Administration member, came on board in 2006 alongside "working board of trustees" members such as civil rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson and Gregory Jackson, head of the largest African American-owned auto dealership in the nation. "Morris Brown may be in serious condition, but it has all of the fundamentals and a foundation to thoroughly recover and thrive," says DeVeaux, who was appointed in 2004 at the height of the financial crisis. "The board of trustees is focused on financial management and has added to its membership those trustees with exper-

tise in this field. If we can save Delta Air Lines and the [Martin Luther] King Papers, we can certainly save Morris Brown College. To not do it would be to denigrate the spirit of what brought the school this far.”

While DeVaux remains optimistic that altruism will ultimately inspire the right people to help Morris Brown for the “greater good” of the Atlanta community, Pritchett is pragmatic. He’s committed to the hard-nosed business details he feels are imperative to carrying out the school’s current “survival and stability plan,” which entails sharing “the Morris Brown story” with anyone who will listen, eliminating debt through aggressive fundraising, and mapping out a strategy to successfully regain accreditation. Both men agree, however, that a marriage of their unique approaches and ideologies will ultimately be the school’s saving grace.

“We needed a manager that could oversee operations and helps us raise funds, and we knew that he could do it,” DeVaux says of Pritchett. “He was an active member in the A.M.E. church and had been a senior administrator for DeKalb County Schools, where he handled a variety of duties, including fiscal affairs and the construction of buildings . . . The board later decided he would be a great fit to serve as acting president.”

“He brings the right spirit—a spirit of partnership, a spirit that we can do it,” adds Boazman, a 1990 graduate. “It’s this attitude that Morris Brown needs to move forward and restore community confidence in its leadership.”

A great attitude is a plus, but regaining accreditation will take much more than goodwill, contends Lynn Huntley, president of the Southern Education Foundation. “SACS has an enormous number of requirements . . . They face a tough road ahead to regain accreditation,” she says. “It’s a very courageous endeavor, and if they are successful they will have made a major impact on improving educational opportunities for



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many deserving students, but it's not going to be easy."

There are other signs that things are looking up for the school that was once rumored to be so mired in debt that its basketball team switched to the considerably more competitive Division I, playing guaranteed losses against teams such as Boston College, Oregon, and Marquette, just to collect \$40,000 paychecks. Today, Pritchett boasts that last year the school reopened a renovated dormitory and briefly leased space to Ware Prep Academy, a college-preparatory program for academically challenged student athletes. Both endeavors, Pritchett says, are part of a plan to "reposition and repackage" the school.

Cicely Bland, a 1997 graduate who has returned to pursue a bachelor's degree in organizational management and leadership, shares her president's optimism. "It is a challenging situation, but with every challenge there's a new chance at victory," says the former editor in chief of *The Atlanta Tribune* magazine. "This situation is giving us the opportunity to get back to the basics and realize that self-reliance is important. It's about all of us in the community saying, 'What can I do to help?'"

Alumna Laura Alexander agrees that her alma mater fills an important niche, but she feels school leaders should do more to restore trust. "Every month I'm getting something in the mail asking for money," says Alexander, of Austell. "I think that a lot of us want to help out, but we need to have some indication that what we're sending is going to get in the right hands. They should have a monthly meeting for the alumni to meet the new administration. I think that would help out a lot."

Pritchett knows restoring trust is essential to Morris Brown's success—a key entry on his ever-growing to-do list and what he knows business-first Atlantans want to hear. "Prior to 2003, Morris Brown's economic impact [on the city] was over \$3 million a year," he says. "We want to bring that back." ■

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