

Fords at the Helm



ON EXACTLY THE SAME DAY, in two different New England towns, two Haverford alums opened impressive new doors.

On July 1, in Northampton, Mass., **Sarah Willie-LeBreton '86** stepped into her office as the new president of Smith College, while **Garry W. Jenkins '92** took over the president's office at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine.

They join a long list of distinguished Fords who have gone on to lead a U.S. college or university. (See p. 45.) Still, rising to the top of higher ed leadership is a major achievement—one that both Jenkins and Willie-LeBreton have spent decades working toward.

Jenkins, who became Bates' 9th president since its 1855 founding and its first Black president, was previously dean of the University of Minnesota Law School. In announcing his appointment, the chair of Bates' board of trustees called Jenkins "a brilliant and accomplished institutional leader who is steeped in the power and promise of the liberal arts."

Willie-LeBreton, a sociologist, is the former provost of Swarthmore College. When she was named the 12th president of Smith—the second Black president in its 148-year history—a statement from the college's board head lauded her courage "to engage in challenging conversations and make difficult decisions while simultaneously exuding the joy, warmth, and curiosity that is required to lead an institution with empathy and integrity."

What links these two Fords, of course, and what helped set them on their paths as higher ed leaders, is their Haverford experiences. For Willie-LeBreton, it was being exposed to Quaker traditions and learning listening skills as a member of the Honor Council. For Jenkins, who calls his time at Haverford "transformative," it was the exposure to leadership skills he gained through heading the Customs program.

Here are their stories.





“The right person at

the right time.”

After a 26-year career at Swarthmore, sociologist Sarah Willie-LeBreton '86 ascends to the presidency of Smith College.

BY LINI S. KADABA

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arah Willie-LeBreton '86 first honed her listening skills at Haverford College, where she won a seat on the Honor Council and had to figure out the best outcome for not only students on trial, but the larger community.

“The experience was profound,” she says. “It felt like both a burden and an awesome responsibility.” Willie-LeBreton, a sociologist and veteran higher-ed administrator, says she found a fellow Ford also serving on Honor Council who became a role model. “Besides my own internal ethical compass, he helped me develop a sense of when to speak, when not to speak, how to listen and how to approach decision making.”

In July, the 59-year-old former Swarthmore College provost assumed the presidency of Smith College in Northampton, Mass. The listening skills Willie-LeBreton honed at Haverford, it turns out, continue to hold a key place in the collaborative leadership approach she is bringing to her new role. As the 2023-2024 school year got underway, she launched a yearlong listening tour to get to know the liberal arts women's college of about 2,500 undergraduates. This is while she focuses on a couple of initial goals, including improving diversity at every level of the college and growing a sense of community following the isolation of the pandemic.

In many ways, Willie-LeBreton may well be exactly what the school needs for its next chapter during these polarizing times—a bridge builder. Smith, like other higher-ed institutions, faces a host of challenges, not the least of which is the impact of the recent Supreme Court ruling that has upended the use of affirmative action in college admissions. Then there are national and global issues to tackle around social justice, political positions, free speech, climate change, and more. Particularly top of mind at a women's college is a world where patriarchy and misogyny continue to exist.

“When the search committee for Smith knocked on my door, I was

NEW SMITH COLLEGE
PRESIDENT Sarah
Willie-LeBreton meets
with students at an ice
cream social.

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curious,” says Willie-LeBreton. “Then I thought about my own experience of having taken many classes at Bryn Mawr, and taken my first semester junior year at [historically Black women’s college] Spelman.” These were experiences she deeply appreciated.

In an interview with *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, published after her appointment was announced in January, she said, “For me, it was not easy being a woman at a college that had only recently gone coed, and it was not easy being one of the few students of color at a college that was predominantly white. So having the opportunity to be in spaces where the assumption was ‘of course, you should be here!’ was transformative.”

She is only the second Black president to lead Smith. Ruth Simmons was the first, holding the office from 1995 to 2001. “It’s one thing to do this once: ‘That was interesting, and we’re done.’ It’s another for a school to say, ‘This seems like the right person at the right time. And both her identity and who she is seem like the right fit for the place.’ I thought that reflected really well on Smith.”

One important way Haverford helped shape her, she says, is by exposing her to Quaker traditions that, coupled with the Honor Code, offered a blueprint to “engage in conflict with one another and in resolution.”

Raised as an Episcopalian, Willie-LeBreton was attracted to Quakerism’s nonviolent response to conflict, attending Thursday Meeting and eventually becoming a Friend and member of Providence Friends Meeting in Media, Pa. “I think the

willingness to sit in silence—to be quiet and to listen—were really transformative for me,” she says, “and they are part of me.”

She put that principle on full display during the final interview session for the Smith post, according to Susan Molineaux, vice chair of Smith’s Board of Trustees and chair of the search committee, made up of board members, students, faculty, and staff. Candidates, she says, were asked to discuss the college’s values and ways they would support them as president.

Willie-LeBreton asked committee members to discuss what *they* thought was important to Smith. She then quickly integrated the information from the many voices in the room, deftly moving the conversation forward, says Molineaux, a 1975 Smith graduate and biotech CEO. “She did this amazing engagement of the committee,” she says, “the opposite of sitting there and just talking at the committee. It was so energizing. That was the clincher.”

Willie-LeBreton’s research expertise in sociology—and more specifically, social inequality and race and ethnicity—has served as a fitting lens to view organizational health, behavior, and leadership, and to explore what role institutions, including colleges and universities, play in systemic inequality. “It’s not just an academic profession, but a whole way of analyzing and approaching the world,” says the author of *Acting Black: College, Identity, and the Performance of Race* (2003). She also edited and contributed to 2016’s *Transforming the Academy: Faculty Perspectives on Diversity and Pedagogy*.

Systemic inequality was something her family knew about first-hand. Her grandfather was a sleeping car porter, and a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first Black union to be granted membership into the American Federation of Labor. “He wanted to make sure his children did not have to work for tips and at the behest of people who treated them like servants,” she says. Her paternal grandparents believed that the key to that different future was education, and they would put all five of their children through college and graduate school.

Willie-LeBreton’s father, the late **Charles V. Willie**, a well-known sociologist, became the first Black tenured professor at Syracuse University, and then accepted a position as a tenured professor of education at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education. In 2000, Haverford recognized him with an honorary degree.



Willie-LeBreton meets new faculty members at Smith.



(top) Willie-LeBreton greets a Haverford classmate's daughter, who is now a Smith student. (bottom) The new Smith president at an end-of-summer gathering she hosted for faculty and staff.

Willie-LeBreton and her two younger brothers (both of whom also majored in sociology) grew up going to sociology academic conferences as family vacations. She considered becoming a civil rights attorney, but her father—her first mentor—encouraged her to stick with sociology, a field in which he had found great success and could serve as guide.

After earning her doctorate from Northwestern University in 1995, Willie-LeBreton taught at Colby and Bard colleges.

In 1997, she joined Swarthmore to lead its Black Studies program. During her 26 years there, she rose to associate provost and then provost and dean of faculty.

It was in these roles that Willie-LeBreton says she found great satisfaction—even joy—in using her sociology background to serve as the “translator” between faculty and the administration or board.

“It was also exhausting,” she says, noting she worked a good 85 hours a week, while also juggling raising her son with husband **Jonathan LeBreton '79**, a librarian. When she can snatch some downtime, Willie-LeBreton devours mysteries, particularly ones with plucky women as protagonists, and enjoys plays, poetry readings, concerts, and art openings. “I also love a good dance party,” she says.

Swarthmore President Valerie Smith says Willie-LeBreton's legacy at the college includes advocating for resources to support teaching and scholarship, spearheading capital projects, and steering the college successfully through the pandemic.

“Sarah left an indelible mark on Swarthmore,” says Smith,



who Willie-LeBreton calls one of her mentors. “But beyond those tangible contributions, Sarah—regardless of the role she held—brought a spirit of empathy and compassion, curiosity and creativity, and care and joy that touched all of whom she encountered.”

Now, Willie-LeBreton has the opportunity to find that same joy in her work at Smith. It all starts, of course, with listening to a range of voices—a practice, she argues, particularly suited to a liberal arts campus.

“There is a desperate need for us—as individuals, as political parties, as religious, educational, and other nonprofit organizations, as neighborhoods and collectives—to engage each other with curiosity and humility,” Willie-LeBreton says. “So, when I defend the liberal arts today, it's a defense of democracy, it's a defense of diplomacy, it's a defense of diversity, it's a defense of conversation and the genuine exchange of ideas.”



“I’m thrilled that this

dream has come true.”

Attorney, professor, former law school dean—Garry W. Jenkins ’92 advances an extraordinary career in education as the 9th president of Bates College.

BY ANNE STEIN



PHOTO: PHYLLIS GRABER/JENSEN/BATES COLLEGE

NEW BATES COLLEGE PRESIDENT Garry W. Jenkins meets students at a daylong “Get to Know Bates” tour in July.

It’s been four days since **Garry W. Jenkins ’92** took the helm at Bates College, and on a hot July morning, the newly appointed president is on a “get to know Bates” walking tour. Clad in tan slacks, a blue sport coat, and maroon tie, Jenkins is visiting everything from the science center and libraries to the theater and dance studios. He’s stopping in offices, talking to faculty and staff, and standing in the lunch line chatting with students and alums.

By the end of the day, the 9th president of Bates—and the first Black president to lead the college—is being praised for his approachability and willingness to listen.

“He seems very cool. Very kind,” said 2018 Bates alum Elliot Chun ’18, to a Bates College writer who trailed the new president. Chun, who was on campus over the summer coaching kids in swim camp, said that Jenkins “kept asking me questions about my career and what path it took after Bates, and how I think Bates helped me make the transition.”

“He talks to you like he’s a friend. I found that amazing,” said Bates sophomore Sakina Saidi ’26, from Afghanistan. “He asked what I was doing this summer. I felt he included me in the conversation.”

Professor Emeritus of History Dennis Grafflin described Jenkins as “accessible, welcoming, warm, and kind. Those are all good things. That’s the way Bates is supposed to be.”

Jenkins comes to Bates after serving as dean and William S. Pattee Professor of Law at the University of Minnesota Law School since 2016, where he worked for four of those seven years with the university’s then-president **Joan T.A. Gabel ’88** (now chancellor at the University of Pittsburgh). Jenkins describes his fellow Haverfordian as “a terrific leader, wonderful friend, and generous mentor.”

A legal scholar, civil rights advocate, and leader in higher education, Jenkins has been interested in serving as a college president for a long time.

“I’m thrilled that this dream has come true,” he says. Born and raised in northern New Jersey, his parents were both the first in their families to graduate from college. “My mom was a high school teacher, and my dad became a computer programmer

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and part-time community college instructor. And from them I developed a strong belief in higher education, and ultimately, a passion for the ways that it ignites human potential.”

The more that Jenkins learned about Bates during the interview process, the more excited he was about the job. “Bates shares many of the same values as Haverford, so it felt familiar. It felt like the kind of place that I could love, the same way that I love Haverford.” Elaine Tuttle Hansen, a longtime professor of English and former provost at Haverford, was president of Bates from 2002 to 2011. “So it’s nice to continue that connection between the two schools,” Jenkins says.

The Lewiston, Maine, college has been the perfect landing spot for Jenkins, who cites its core values, which come from its founding by abolitionists in 1855. “It’s an institution that from its very beginning educated men and women together and has always been open to people of all races, which was highly unusual at the time.”

For his part, being the first Black president is an honor. “If my presence offers a sense of belonging and affirmation, or if it signals that Bates is an institution that students or faculty of color ought to consider seriously, I’m gratified to have that opportunity. I know it was important to me to have role models and see them succeed.”

Also the college’s first president who identifies as gay, Jenkins has been warmly welcomed. At his first speech in March as president-elect, some of the biggest cheers from faculty, staff, and students came when Jenkins introduced his husband, Jon J. Lee, a University of Maine law professor. “He is a remarkably talented and dedicated teacher-scholar,” said Jenkins to the audience. “He teaches law, with a focus on ethics and intellec-

tual property. And, to be honest, you all will soon come to realize that the best thing about my becoming president is that it means Jon will be part of the Bates community.”

The two are a formidable team. “It’s great to be married to another teacher-scholar, so of course we talk about higher education and law,” Jenkins says. “But we have lots of other things to talk about that aren’t related to work as well. We try to keep a healthy balance,” he says with a laugh.

As a new college president, Jenkins will face some difficult tasks. A month before he arrived, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that colleges cannot make race-based admissions decisions. “DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] and belonging are core aspects of the Bates mission,” says Jenkins, “and while I’m personally disappointed with the Supreme Court decision, it doesn’t change our values, who we are, or our mission.”

He hopes to teach at Bates, focusing on introducing undergraduates to law and the U.S. legal system.

When he was at the University of Minnesota Law School, he taught a class titled “George Floyd’s Minneapolis: Past, Present, and Moving Forward.”

He explains that George Floyd was murdered just three miles from the law school. “So it was a really important moment for our whole country, but it hit home in a different way for us at the University of Minnesota,” Jenkins says. “That summer, I put together a course with a colleague that explored what happened



(left) Jenkins enjoying an ice cream social with summer admission interns at a staff member’s home near campus. (right) Bates alum Elliot Chun ’18 got the chance to chat with Jenkins in the lunch line. “He seems very cool. Very kind,” Chun said.



Jenkins meets more Bates folks at Lake Andrews on campus.

from multiple perspectives—and the unrest that followed—to fully understand the historical, socio-political, and legal contexts and implications, as well as strategies, ideas, and ways forward.”

Before his time as a law scholar, Jenkins was a political science major and a Charles A. Dana Scholar at Haverford, where his primary activity was the Customs program. He says his Haverford years were transformative. “That’s still my touchstone. It shaped my life in ways I’m not sure anything else would have the capacity to do.”

He went on to earn a joint master’s degree in public policy from Harvard’s Kennedy School and a J.D. from the Law School, where he served as editor in chief of the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*.

Before embarking on his higher education career, he was a law clerk on the U.S. Court of Appeals, an attorney at international law firm Simpson Thacher, and chief operating officer of the Goldman Sachs Foundation. Jenkins went on to serve as a law professor and associate dean for academic affairs at the Ohio State University, where he was one of the founders of its law and leadership program.

As the law school dean at the University of Minnesota, Jenkins led fundraising initiatives that nearly doubled the school’s endowment, while the credentials of admitted students hit record highs as did the school’s bar exam pass rate. He also focused on diversifying the school’s student population and strengthening its innovative racial justice law and civil rights appellate clinics.

Throughout his career, Jenkins has remained close to Haverford. He was president of the alumni association from 2006 to 2008, then served on the Board of Managers for 14 years (2009–2023)—including nine years as vice chair. “I’ve been involved with Haverford for so long as a Board member, working particularly closely with recent presidents **Steve Emerson ’74**, Dan Weiss, Kim Benston, and Wendy Raymond, as well as wonderful Board colleagues and Haverford’s outstanding senior staff. I’ve learned so much from all of them. I’m so grateful for those relationships. They’re all important and relevant, and I carry them with me to my new job at Bates.”

Anne Stein is a Chicago-based journalist and a frequent contributor to Haverford’s alumni magazine.

PHOTO: PHYLLIS GRABER-JENSEN/BATES COLLEGE

Fords in the President’s Office

Sarah Willie-LeBreton and Garry W. Jenkins join a distinguished list of Haverford alums who have led colleges and universities across the country.

WILLIAM WISTAR COMFORT,
Class of 1894, Haverford College president,
1917–1940

FELIX MORLEY ’15,
Haverford College president 1940–45

HUGH BORTON ’26,
Haverford College president, 1957–1967

STEPHEN G. CARY ’37,
acting Haverford College president, 1977–1978

JOHN R. HOGNESS ’43,
University of Washington president, 1974–1979

ROBERT C. GOOD ’45,
Denison University president, 1976–1983

BILL CHACE ’61,
Emory University president, 1994–2003;
Wesleyan University president, 1988–1994

CHRISTOPH M. KIMMICH ’61,
Brooklyn College president, 2000–2009

TOM G. KESSINGER ’65,
Haverford College president, 1988–1996

HUNTER R. RAWLINGS III ’66,
Cornell University president, 1995–2003, and
interim president, 2005–2006 and 2016–2017;
University of Iowa president, 1987–1995

DOUGLAS C. BENNETT ’68,
Earlham College president, 1996–2011

ROBERT MONG ’71,
University of North Texas at Dallas president,
2015–present

STEPHEN G. EMERSON ’74,
Haverford College president, 2007–2011

JOSEPH URGO ’78,
President of St. Mary’s College of Maryland,
2010–2013

JOAN GABEL ’88,
University of Pittsburgh chancellor, as of 2023;
University of Minnesota president, 2019–2023