



## BETHUNE - COOKMAN UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1904 by Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune

### **She came for the music, but left with a legacy**

Parris Lewis was destined to be a performer. Growing up in a family of Gospel musicians, instrumentalists and vocalists, her earliest childhood memories and experiences were embedded in the arts. By the time she was nine years old, Ms. Lewis was performing in organized choirs, chorale ensembles, musicals and plays in her hometown – Brooklyn, NY.

By the time she graduated from Talent Unlimited High School, a small, Manhattan performing arts school noted for its high academic standards, Ms. Lewis, now a trained dancer and mezzo-soprano opera singer, had accrued enough musical and theatrical experiences and accolades to gain admission to any number of notable conservatories.

However, her search proved to be a bit more challenging than expected.

“I auditioned for a bunch of conservatories” she said, “and to be honest, they were not the most comfortable campuses or spaces when I did go visit. That was a sign to me to explore my options.”

She broadened her search to include HBCUs, and that is when she re-discovered Bethune-Cookman University. Her cousin attended B-CU.

“Once I visited Bethune’s campus, I fell in love,” Ms. Lewis said. “New York City is a melting pot, and I’ve always been in arts programs, so safe to say, I’ve always been around many diverse groups of people. Bethune-Cookman was one of my first few experiences, outside of my church in my family, that I encountered so many different Black people. Outside of Howard University, Bethune had an energy I had never felt before on historically black college campus. I loved the energy I felt.”

Ms. Lewis entered B-CU in 2012 as a music performance major and embraced campus life, joining several social and professional organizations, sororities, and fraternities. Of course, she was fully immersed in the Concert Chorale and other performance endeavors. By her sophomore year, she made a shift in her educational path and declared a music education major. Ms. Lewis said the move allowed her more new experiences in the realm of conferences, student teaching, and field experiences, all the while maintaining her demanding performance schedule.

She also discovered another part of herself beyond performer – teacher.

“The education department was very helpful when I came over to the education side, because they saw the teacher in me, as well as the artist in me,” Ms. Lewis said. “I felt a lot of support to be myself. And what that observed what that brought to the classroom setting”

“I was thankful for the support from the music and education departments,” she continued. “They encouraged me to push myself, to try new things. They would ask, what’s next? What do you want for yourself? I felt as if a lot of things we carefully orchestrated for me to succeed, and I was thankful for that.”

One of the highlights of her time at B-CU was being crowned Miss Homecoming 2015.

“That was something that I am really proud of,” Ms. Lewis said. “I was going through a hard time at school, and it just reminded me of the beautiful parts of myself, the parts of me that make me, me. I’m somebody that gives 100% of myself no matter what I’m doing. And that can be a pro and a con, because you exert a lot of energy, but also you share your authentic self. Through the homecoming pageant, I was able to just reach a lot more of a student body with just being who I was.”

Ms. Lewis said Bethune-Cookman University afforded her a deeper educational experience than she would have ever received at a conservatory. She said she learned a lot about herself during her four years on B-CU’s campus.

“Had I gone to a conservatory, I would have been drowning in opera and wanting to be the premier soloist. However, at Bethune, I could focus not only on my music, but my social, emotional learning as well. In the end, I became an educator, much like our school’s foundress.”

Since graduating from B-CU in 2016 with a bachelor’s degree in Music Education K-12, Parris Lewis has been pursuing both of her passions – performance and teaching.

She has performed with organizations such as the New York City Opera, The Public Theatre, The Bronx Opera, Carnegie Hall, The Grady-Rayam Foundation, The American Heart Association, The National Endowment of the Arts, The United Negro College Fund, New York Fashion Week. She has performed internationally as well.

Recently, she played a church lady and was Shug Avery’s understudy for the recent national tour of *The Color Purple*.

Ms. Lewis currently performs with The New York Choral Society, Coleman Collective and works as a Teaching Artist for The Leadership Program and the Future Music Project at Carnegie Hall.

“I teach songwriting to incarcerated teens. It’s an amazing and rewarding job that I can’t really talk about, because my students are wards of the state. Still, it’s an incredible experience.”

Ms. Lewis said she strives to live out Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune’s legacy in every aspect of her life.

“When I perform and when I teach, I am sharing of myself, and that is so much of Dr. Bethune’s legacy” she said. “Go where you go, and leave a good impression, leave good seeds to grow. People don’t remember what you say. They remember how you made them feel. And I want to make people feel warm. I want to make people feel good. And I want to make people feel valid, and I want to make people feel powerful, whatever it is that they do and who they are.”

*SUSTAINING A LEGACY OF FAITH, SCHOLARSHIP AND SERVICE*