



## BETHUNE - COOKMAN UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1904 by Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune

### All Roads Led to Bethune-Cookman University

Leonte Tukes was 11 years old the first time he stepped on the Bethune-Cookman University campus. He recalls being in awe of the ambiance, noting a sense of warmth and welcome like no other. In his heart, he belonged here. However, as the youngest of six children being raised by a single mother, the young Mr. Tukes questioned the possibility of his dream coming true.

“My mother always encouraged us to chase our dreams,” he said. “But my family didn’t really believe in making large investments (such as a college education) when it came to finances and time. We weren’t necessarily a middle class family, but we weren’t poor either. We didn’t always have a lot though.”

Fast forward 10 years, and Mr. Tukes not only brought his dream to fruition, with the help of those who saw the potential in him, but he has also made a name for himself as a student leader at Bethune-Cookman University. His is a story of perseverance and determination, much like that of our founder, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, and one we’d like to share.

Before he started kindergarten, Mr. Tukes knew he wanted to be a funeral director. At the same time, he felt called to become a minister. A few years later, Mr. Tukes shared his aspirations with his fifth grade teacher, and this is where the road to Bethune-Cookman begins. His teacher encouraged him to look at Bethune-Cookman for his higher education venture.

“So at age 11, I was already searching colleges, and Bethune-Cookman University had been one top choice,” the 21-year-old St. Petersburg native said.

Shortly thereafter, his church, New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church, had a change in pastors, and the new First Lady was a 1986 alumna of none other than BCU. She, too, sang the school’s praises, and when it was time for the pastoral leaders’ high school daughter to tour colleges, the family invited 11-year-old Tukes to visit BCU with them. That visit forever changed the trajectory of Mr. Tuke’s life.

Although he had no idea how he was going to afford college, Mr. Tukes remained steadfast in his desire to one day be a BCU student. Throughout junior high and high school, he continued to make good grades, stay active in school, and build on his reputation. During his senior year of high school, one of his college prep teachers, a 1994 BCU alumna, encouraged him to take one last look at Bethune-Cookman.

In 2018, seven years after that first life-changing visit, Mr. Tukes made his final trip to the Daytona Beach university. The spirit of the university was just as he remembered, and he knew this was the place God wanted him to be.

Mr. Tukes immediately began applying for scholarships, and “the money started pouring in.” He was going to be the first person in his family to go to college!

Mr. Tukes embraced college life from the start, joining the Gospel Choir and becoming involved in Student Government. He served as his freshman and sophomore class president and today is the president of the Student Government Association at BCU. He has also been involved in the NCAAP Bethune-Cookman University chapter, Pre-Alumni Council, the Brother 2 Brother organization and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., and more.

Mr. Tukes said he sees Dr. Bethune’s legacy being lived out not only in himself, but also in his peers, especially other first-generation students.

“[Dr. Bethune] displayed determination; she displayed beating the odds,” he said. “That’s the type of culture our school was founded. We bring in students who want to beat the odds, who are open minded to becoming global leaders. Her legacy is very important to our institution, very important to every student who walks on this campus.”

“Her characteristics, her attributes and determination, self-discipline, encouragement, education, were so important to her,” Mr. Tukes continued. “These things become part of each of us as we come to campus. It’s in our curriculum; it’s in our culture. It is the type of people we all are becoming throughout our matriculation.”

He encourages the next generation of students to embrace the school founder’s philosophy and offered this advice:

“Keep going. Keep grinding. Don’t ever stop because you’re going to be on your way to the top.”

As for his family, Mr. Tukes said realizing his dream of a college education has given his family members and friends a renewed hope that they, too, can change the course of their lives. Those close to him have secured job promotions and have also enrolled in college.

Mr. Tukes initial journey at Bethune-Cookman University will come to an end next year when he graduates with his bachelor’s degree in religion and philosophy. He plans to continue his education at Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service in Atlanta.

However, if Wildcat pride is any indication, we can rest assure that Mr. Tukes will be an active and supportive alum.

“[My time at Bethune-Cookman has] been thrilling. I’ve learned so much. The other students, faculty and staff are important to me. It’s a place like no other. We are family,” Mr. Tukes said.

“Bethune-Cookman has a way of providing experiences that help you express and exude the potential that you have,” he continued. “I came here as a as an ordinary person, and Bethune-Cookman has made me into an extraordinary person.”

*SUSTAINING A LEGACY OF FAITH, SCHOLARSHIP AND SERVICE*

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