

Crystal deGregory named director of KSU's Atwood Institute

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By Chanda Veno Email the author Published 6:52 am Tuesday, September 5, 2017

She will enlighten on race, education, democratic ideal

Crystal deGregory believes everyone has a story and every story matters.

Recently named director of Kentucky State University's new Atwood Institute for Race, Education and Democratic Ideal, deGregory has been entrusted with carrying on the virtues of Rufus Atwood, a former KSU president whom the institute honors.

"It is a privilege to work at a place, for a cause, and with people you believe in, and, likewise, who believe in you," deGregory said. "I don't think of myself as being 'in charge' but rather as being invested with a charge to carry out this important work during arguably tenuous times."

Atwood, a native of Hickman and a descendant of slaves, is a shining example of a success story. Growing up he learned the value of hard work and the transformative power of education in the early part of the 20th century. He enrolled at Fisk University, but he suspended his college education to enlist in the Army during World War I. After serving with the signal corps of the all-black 92nd Division, he resumed his undergraduate studies, graduating from Fisk in 1920 with a degree in agriculture.

At 32, he became president of Kentucky State College for Colored Persons. It was under his tutelage that the college received its accreditation and continued to grow, becoming the state's only publicly funded black college. He was at the helm for 33 years before retiring in 1962.

"Atwood's story represents the very best of Kentucky State University, the state of Kentucky and of historically black college and university culture," deGregory said. "It offers us lessons about who we were, who we are and how we came to be. By preserving it, we honor Atwood's legacy, and we hold it aloft as a shining example of the potentiality of our individual and collective excellence in all things."

DeGregory, a noted historian and storyteller, believes that race relations in the U.S. have been and continue to be in the forefront but that Americans' level of consciousness ebbs and flows over time.

"This particular incarnation of race relations is a prime example of this reality. The presidency of Barack Obama, not so long ago, stirred up a debate over the possibility of post-racialism," she said. "We now know that such idealistic notions beguiled very harsh truths. Institutional, structural and unapologetically violent racism are much a reality. The question is, what, if anything are we doing to eradicate it?"

DeGregory stressed the importance of social issues — geography, poverty, race, education and democracy — in our lives.

"Social conditions are critical and often determining factors in the fate and futures of every single person. The ideal that people can overcome disadvantages demands that we acknowledge that both disadvantages

and advantages abound — making equality hard-earned and equity extraordinarily rare,” she added. “Geography matters. Poverty matters. Access to education and democracy matters. And, yes, race matters.”

As director of the Atwood Institute, deGregory will advance research, dialogue and advocacy for anti-racism training and conflict resolution, and exploration of the elements of democracy in solving intractable social problems. She plans to put special research emphasis on the dynamics of Appalachia, the African Diaspora and migrant communities.

“We are proud that KSU will serve as the founding institution for a first-of-its-kind research center stationed on a historically black campus, and that our diverse faculty, student body and surrounding community will lead the nation in this important work,” KSU President M. Christopher Brown II said.

DeGregory is enjoying getting to know Frankfort and KSU. “I like the quiet of Frankfort,” she said. “I’m going to enjoy taking the time to discover all it has to offer.”

So, where does she stand on the debate over whether the Jefferson Davis statue should remain in the Capitol rotunda? “Each of us gets to decide what side of history we wish to be on. Davis’ choice was clear,” she explained. “The only question that remains is: On which side are we?”

DeGregory received her Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in history from Vanderbilt University. She also holds a Master of Education from Tennessee State University and a Bachelor of Arts in History from Fisk University.

In her spare time, she enjoys cooking for family and friends and dabbling in amateur photography. “One thing I need to commit to is playing more tennis,” she quipped.