

## WSU News

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# Celebrating women who have helped build Shocker Nation

By WSU Alumni Association



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From its early days as Fairmount College, Wichita State University has celebrated a rich history of women who have worked to build a better community and a better world. In commemoration of Women's History Month, we've compiled a list of just a few of the women who have contributed to the greatness of Shocker Nation.

**Ruth Graves**, who graduated from what was then Fairmount College in 1903, was the institution's first known graduate to become a professional artist. A student of Elizabeth Sprague at Fairmount College in the early years of the 20th century, Graves went on to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. She then went to live in New York and later, Paris. When she was a student at Fairmount, Ruth was art editor of *The Sunflower* student newspaper during her senior year and art editor of the first-ever *Parnassus*, a campus yearbook produced by her junior class in 1902. Her gold-leaf interpretation of Mount Parnassus graces the cover, and her line drawings fill its pages.



Ruth Graves

**Delia Garcia**, who earned a degree in minority studies at WSU in 2002, was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives in 2004, beginning her work at the statehouse in January 2005 and becoming the first Latina and the youngest woman to serve in the House. She was 27 when elected to represent House District 103. She went on to serve from 2019 to 2020 as Kansas Labor Secretary and now serves as director of the National Migrant Seasonal Head Start Association in Washington, D.C.

**Karla Burns** made her New York City Metropolitan Opera debut in "Porgy and Bess" and was nominated for a Tony award for her portrayal of Queenie in the 1982-83 Broadway revival of "Show Boat." This dynamic performer was the recipient of numerous awards, including a Drama Desk Award and the 1991 Lawrence Olivier Award for Best Supporting Performer in a Musical. In 1981, Burns earned bachelor's degrees in music education and in speech/theater. In 2016, she was awarded an honorary doctorate. It was also in Wichita where she gave one of her last performances as Evilene in "The Wiz."



**1977 graduate Mona Nemer (right) walks with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.**

**Mona Nemer**, a 1977 chemistry graduate, was appointed by Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau to the post of Canada's chief science adviser in 2017. Prior to that, she was professor and vice president of research at the University of Ottawa, where she directed the Molecular Genetics and Cardiac Regeneration Laboratory.

**Leanne Caret** is president and chief executive officer of Boeing Defense, Space & Security (BDS), Boeing's business unit that provides aerospace products and services for defense, government, space, intelligence and security customers worldwide. Caret, who earned an MBA from Wichita State in 1990, became the first woman to head one of Boeing's three major business units when she assumed control of BDS in March 2016.

Three-time Grammy Award-winning opera star **Joyce DiDonato** earned a bachelor's degree in vocal music education from Wichita State in 1992. DiDonato, a Kansas native, arrived in 1988 with her sights set on becoming a vocal music teacher, but she changed course midway after her roommate encouraged her to pursue opera. Since her start in the WSU Opera Theatre production of *Die Fledermaus*, DiDonato has performed with many of the world's leading opera companies and orchestras, and has earned numerous awards, including the 2000 ARIA and the 2018 Laurence Olivier Award for outstanding achievement in opera. She also received Grammys for Best Classical Vocal Solo in 2012 and 2014, and Best Classical Performance in 2019.



**Jill Cobb**, who graduated in 1977 with a general studies degree, became a forensic pathologist. Cobb has pulled some dark truths from some dark places around the world, including Bosnia in the aftermath of the former Yugoslavia's civil war. She monitored and assisted in the exhumation and identification of war casualties as a member of Physicians for Human Rights.

1961 graduate **Judith Bell**, an amateur golfer and golf administrator, was elected the first woman president of the U.S. Golf Association in 1996, becoming the organization's 54th president, but one of the very first women to lead a national sports organization of any kind. A player in 38 USGA championships, she was also in the 1950 U.S. Women's Open — at the age of 14. In the 1964 Women's Open, she shot a record score of 67 in the third round, a record that wasn't broken until 1978. Her lifelong commitment to golf was paired with savvy business sense that oversaw several successful clothing stores and restaurants. In 1998, she was presented with the WSU Alumni Achievement Award by the WSUAA. In 2001, she was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame.

**Stephanie Dawkins Davis**, who earned a bachelor's in health care administration in 1989 from WSU, was recently nominated by President Joe Biden to the U.S. Court of Appeals 6th Circuit. Davis currently sits on the District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan and would be the first Black woman from Michigan to serve on the Cincinnati, Ohio-based federal appeals court. When she was sworn in as U.S. District Judge for the Eastern District of Michigan in 2019, Davis was then-President Donald Trump's first Black female judge nominee.



Stephanie Dawkins Davis

**Dr. Donna Sweet** earned a nurse practitioner degree from Wichita State in 1972 and went on to earn an MD from University of Kansas. She is an internationally known physician based in Wichita and

has been widely recognized for her fight against HIV/AIDS. Among her many honors is receiving the Award of Courage from the American Foundation for AIDS Research on World AIDS Day in 1992.

**Kathlien Edmiston** — a 1933 graduate, community leader and university spokesperson — was the first Shocker graduate to be named to the Kansas Board of Regents and the first woman to be elected chairman of the board. Politically active and a woman of action, she is remembered for single-handedly saving the remaining pillars of the Morrison Library, which burned down in 1963. Edmiston sat on one of the library's pillars in front of a bulldozer sent to remove the debris. Three pillars now stand at the university's 17th Street entrance, a lasting tribute not only to WSU's past but also to her foresight and dedication.

**Laura (McMullen) Cross** graduated from Fairmount College in 1925 and is commemorated as the “Grande Dame of Fairmount Hill” in WSU's **Plaza of Heroines**. She was an irrepressible Shocker personality who threw the force of her energies behind the mission of higher education with more than 70 years of service to her alma mater. From 1926 on, she worked at the university, first as a recorder of grades, then rising through the ranks to become assistant registrar in 1940, to associate director of admissions in 1965, to acting dean of admissions in 1970. She is the namesake of the WSUAA's Laura Cross Distinguished Service Award.

**Junetta Everett**, retired vice president of professional relations for Delta Dental of Kansas, is a registered dental hygienist and, in 1979, became the first Black person to graduate from Wichita State's dental hygiene program. Active in the community, another first for this 2015 Alumni Recognition Award recipient, is having served as board chair of the Wichita Regional Chamber of Commerce in 2020, becoming the first African American to hold that position.

**Arneatha Martin** earned a degree in nursing from WSU in 1980. She built a career in nursing and health care administration that featured creating a community-based clinic emphasizing prevention and state-of-the art health care for an underserved demographic. After raising \$2 million in local support, she opened the Center for Health and Wellness in northeast Wichita in 1998. She retired as the clinic's CEO in 2006. She is a 1998 WSU Alumni Achievement recipient. 🍌



**Laura Cross**