

Trailblazers of Tulane: Honoring Black Alums

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In 1966 Deidre Labat became the first Black woman to earn a degree from Newcomb College, Tulane's former women's college. Since then, Tulane has graduated many inspiring Black women, and this Black History Month is a great opportunity to take a closer look at some of their success stories.

[Barbara Farris](#), a New Orleans native, graduated in 1998 with a BA in sociology, but she is most well known for her tremendous basketball career. As a Tulane freshman, she was named to the Second Team All-Louisiana Women's Collegiate Basketball Team and selected Freshman of the Year by the Louisiana Sportswriters Association. Farris continued to thrive as a Lady Wave teammate when the team made their first NCAA tournament appearance. Farris has said that while she was improving her skills on the court, she was also developing her leadership skills. In 2004, she earned a spot in the Tulane Hall of Fame.¹



After her impressive Lady Wave performance, she went on to play in the [WNBA](#) for 10 years. She was drafted to the Detroit Shocks in 2000 and stayed with them for six seasons. She then played for the New York Liberty ('06-'07) and Phoenix Mercury ('08) before returning to Detroit for her last season. Farris took her teams to the playoffs five times. Under Coach Bill Laimbeer, she helped her team win the 2003 championship. After her WNBA run, Farris began her career as a women's basketball coach, starting in New Orleans high schools. Before leaving her hometown again, she took her teams to five state championships.² When Farris was inducted into the Greater New Orleans Sports Hall of Fame in 2017, becoming only the third women's basketball player in the group, Tulane's women's basketball head coach Lisa Stockton recognized Farris's "tremendous influence on girls' basketball in the New Orleans area" and added, "Her accomplishments as a high school, college and

professional player, as well as a high school coach, are unmatched. We are so proud to have been a part of Barbara's journey."³ Farris currently coaches at [Southern Miss](#). From playing to coaching across the country, Farris has proven to be a force to be reckoned with and is a true Tulane history maker.

Lisa Jackson grew up in the Ninth Ward before graduating summa cum laude from Tulane with a degree in chemical engineering.⁴ She went on to work at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection for 10 years. As commissioner, she advocated for climate change conscious legislation; as a result, [New Jersey became the third state](#) in the country to pass global warming legislation that mandated steep emissions cuts. In 2008, she was appointed as chief of staff by Governor Corzine, a post largely regarded as the second most powerful position in state government. Jackson was the third woman and the first African American to hold the post. Less than a year later, [President Obama appointed her](#) to be Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency- another Black history first. Throughout her time in government, Jackson retained her New Orleans spirit, throwing Mardi Gras parties in New Jersey and advocating for wetland restoration after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast.⁵

“I don't think of it every moment, [but] what I hope that we see at the end of this are activists who look like me - activists who represent the future demographic of our country, because that's who's going to be the EPA in the future.”— Lisa Jackson to [CNN](#) on being the first African American EPA administrator



Jackson now works at [Apple as Vice President of Environment](#), Policy and Social Initiatives. She oversees the company's efforts to minimize environmental impact by implementing renewable and energy-efficient sources, using more sustainable materials, and reducing the use of nonrenewable resources. She also leads Apple's Racial Equity and Justice Initiative, which is focused on education, economic opportunity, and criminal justice reform. On February 22, Jackson will be on campus to speak at the inaugural [Black Alumni Weekend](#).

Recent Tulane alum Sandra Diggs-Miller is making history as an advocate for inclusive leadership and women's empowerment. In the midst of a highly successful legal career in the corporate sector, Diggs-Miller graduated from Tulane's A. B. Freeman School of Business in 2022.⁶ After receiving her JD from Loyola University New Orleans in 1998 and starting out as an associate at local law firm Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann, she established herself as a leader at Entergy and moved through various important roles, including corporate diversity and inclusion advisor and assistant general counsel. She currently serves as vice president for external affairs for the Fortune 500 company.



Despite her demanding schedule, Diggs-Miller always finds time to give back and empower others. She is a member of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association, Corporate Counsel Women of Color, Louisiana Women's Leadership Forum, and the board of directors of the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity. Tulane looks forward to welcoming her back to campus on March 7 as the keynote speaker for [Women Making Waves](#), the annual women's leadership conference hosted by the Office of Career & Professional Development. Sandra Diggs-Miller is the embodiment

of this year's theme: "Leading Through the Lens of Inclusivity."

One doesn't have to go far back to find examples of young alums making an impact. In 2019, a Black femme-led student group known as [Les Griots Violet](#) successfully advocated for change on campus. After a significant amount of research, they realized that Tulane could be doing more to increase the quality of life for Black students and started organizing to fix the problems they observed.

"If you don't wake up every day and ask yourself, 'What can I do for racial justice today?' then you're not pushing towards it. There was a lack of that [activism] on campus, so that's where Les Griots Violets came form."— Raven Ancar to Newcomb Magazine

Raven Ancar, Deja Wells, xel simone, Kamiya Stewart, Paige Magee, Abi Mbaye, and Tabita Gnagniko worked together to propose a student equity fee, a \$240 fee that would fund services for students of color, students with disabilities, and those struggling financially.⁷ Although there was pushback, the resolution passed in the Student Government. While the fee has not been enacted by the Tulane administration, [President Fitts committed](#) "\$2.5 million - an amount equal to the proposed fee - to further the goals of the resolution."



A few exciting updates from Les Griots Violet:

- **Raven Ancar created “The Veil,” a documentary about racist systems and the resilience of the Black student population at Tulane; she will be a featured speaker at the Black Alumni Weekend ^{8, 9}**
- **Kamiya Stewart, along with Patrizia Santos, designed a smart water bottle to increase people’s water intake: Caracas Canteens¹⁰**
- **Abi Mbaye was the first Black woman student commencement speaker and co-authored a chapter of Dean Thomas LaVeist’s book¹¹**

As all these stories powerfully illustrate, the accomplishments of Black Tulane alums and the ways in which they are making the world a better place are boundless. It’s vital to take the time to recognize their achievements, as well as the struggles they faced in the process. Since Deidre Labat graduated nearly 60 years ago, Tulane has made significant progress in addressing racial inequity on campus, such as the appointment of Tulane’s [first chief diversity officer](#) in 2020. However, there is still work to be done. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the

graduation rate for Black students at Tulane is 78%, 10 points lower than for White students and at least 6 points lower than for any other race.¹² This data suggests that Black students continue to struggle disproportionately. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate progress, but Tulane must also remain committed to addressing disparities Black students still face. Together, let's ensure Tulane thrives as a beacon of diversity and excellence.

Footnotes:

1. <https://exhibits.tulane.edu/exhibit/tulanewomen/athleticwomen/barbara-f...>
2. <https://crescentcitysports.com/tulane-womens-basketball-alum-barbara-fa...>
3. Ibid
4. <https://sse.tulane.edu/about/board-advisors/lisa-jackson>
5. Ibid
6. <https://alumni.tulane.edu/s/1586/Alumni/16/interior.aspx?sid=1586&gid=3...>
7. <https://www.wwno.org/education/2019-12-09/black-students-say-tulane-nee...>
8. <https://www.nolamusicon.com/raven-ancar/>
9. <https://alumni.tulane.edu/s/1586/Alumni/16/interior.aspx?sid=1586&gid=3...>
10. <https://news.tulane.edu/news/new-orleans-based-alumnae-entrepreneurs-cr...>
11. <https://news.tulane.edu/news/class-2019-student-commencement-speaker-ab...>
12. <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=Tulane+University&s=all&ct=2&id...>