



## Celebrating the Life of Dr. Mary Lofton Davidson

By Sarah Sapp (1999)

**Dr. Mary Lofton Davidson once said, “It doesn’t matter where they’ve come from. It’s where they’re going.”**

If you had the privilege of taking a class with Dr. D, you would quickly learn that she believed every organism, down to the kingdom Monera, had a purpose and should be treated with care. In this context, however, she wasn’t talking about bacteria under a microscope. She was referring to the brilliant little misfits from every tiny town across the magnolia state, from every imaginable background, who found academic refuge at MSMS and, consequently, an inevitably bright trajectory.

Beyond her quirky teaching techniques and loveable “Dr. D” dialect (say it with me: phospholipid bilayer), she was a role model to students. “Dr. Davidson’s presence greatly influenced my time there,” said Kiara Boone, class of 2007, in remembrance of Davidson as the school established The Dr. Mary Davidson Memorial Fund in 2010. “My roommate, Valexia Edwards, talked about the way that Dr. Davidson encouraged her. When I asked her about Dr.

Davidson, she replied that ‘There were times when I felt overwhelmed or discouraged, and Dr. Davidson was always there by my side to talk me through those trying times.’ As a fellow minority female in the science field, Dr. Davidson prepared me for what laid ahead.” Catherine Alecia Clay, class of 1995, found a mentor in Davidson, as well. “She was a great inspiration in my life,” said Clay. “As an African American female, she was a role model. She was one of the reasons that I chose to become an educator. I pray that I will have an impact on the lives of my students like she impacted my life.”

Many students remember her for encouraging independent research, allowing students to come up with their own hypotheses, collect their own samples, record their own data and draw their own conclusions. Even if the study failed or your hypothesis was wrong, you learned something. David Elion, class of 2006, credits Davidson as one of the major reasons he chose

to pursue a career in research, “I even wrote about her in my personal statement for graduate school applications,” said Elion. “She was the first teacher I had who allowed me to really have an experience in conducting research independently. Serving as a guide and mentor, she was very supportive in a number of science competitions I participated in while at MSMS. Throughout my schooling, up until college, Dr. Davidson was the only primary example I had of a black professional in a STEM field, and I can honestly say that without having met her, my career path up until this point would have been completely different.”

It isn’t hard to see why she received numerous awards for her excellence in teaching, including the *Presidential Award for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching*, *Mississippi Teacher of the Year*, *Disney American Teacher Award in Science* and induction into Mississippi’s *Hall of Master Teachers*. In 1992 she received the *Milken Educator* award for her dedication to preparing her students for the future by instilling sound values, as well as helping assure a command of her subject and its related skills. Dr. Davidson not only taught her students the principles of problem solving through scientific application, she also encouraged them to apply this approach to their own lives. Dr. Davidson interacted closely with her students, serving

as a role model and deriving personal satisfaction from helping them reach their full potential and goals.

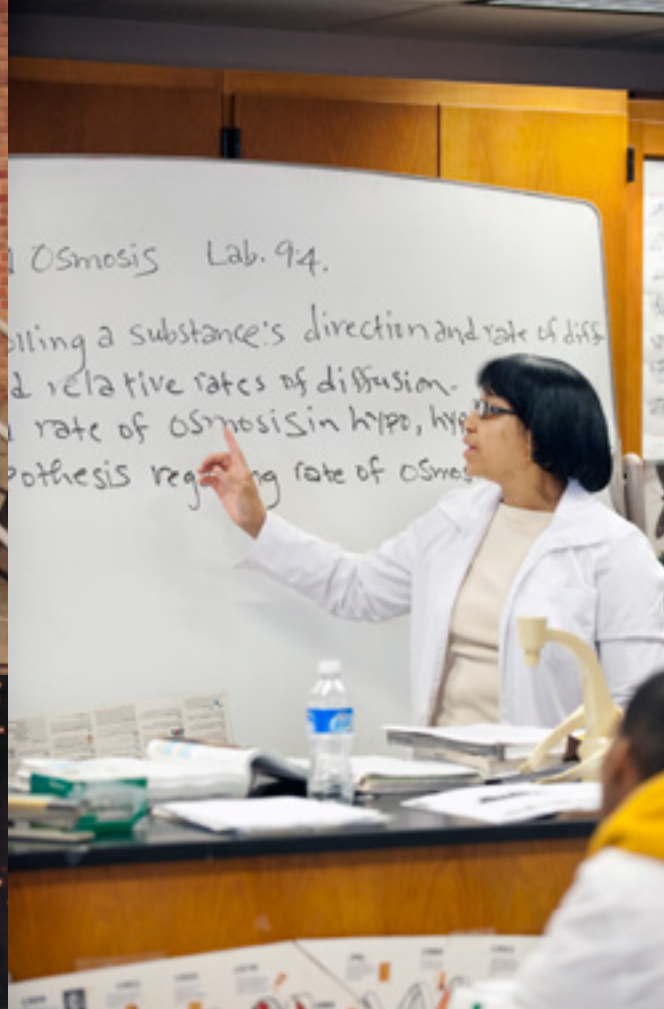
The fact that she cared about biology with such passion was infectious, according to class of 1996 graduate Desmond Walker. “I still carry an inquisitive mindset to the subject because of her,” said Walker.

“Currently, I’ve pledged \$5,000 in her honor to the MSMS Foundation.”

Her passion was so infectious, many students credit her for their own love for the subject matter. “She’s the reason why I decided to get a degree in biology,” said MSMS grad Tiera Towns. “She even tried to Skype our class lesson when she went out of town. She couldn’t get the Skype to work and was calling it “Skyfe” instead of Skype.”

“I had her for biology,” said Challon Perry, class of 1998. “She was very passionate about her work and life outside of MSMS. I remember a number of times helping her make church programs or helping her with some correspondence for some church function. She always encouraged me to go the extra mile, and I felt that she always had my back. I just hope that I did her justice by bringing as much passion and enthusiasm to biology during my tutoring days in Gen. Bio at XULA

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as she did during my time at MSMS. She was an awesome teacher and person.”

Since I personally loved her and her AP Biology class, I offered to be Dr. D’s lab assistant my senior year, the year we moved in and out of a temporary space across campus while Hooper was being renovated with new science labs. I learned quickly while helping pack and unpack her lab that she had a sentimental attachment to most things, including every frozen or preserved creature that had previously been studied in one of her classes. I noticed a small jar behind a stack of books I was packing for her that, upon closer inspection, was full of formaldehyde and a small, well-preserved, unidentifiable rodent. After hearing my bloodcurdling scream from across the lab, she rushed over to see what was the matter. “Oh! There it is!” she exclaimed, offering no explanation as she sauntered away with her long lost specimen. I genuinely believe she knew exactly the date and time, down to the second, that she first encountered this specimen, as she did every single specimen I found thereafter. I wondered if the jar mouse knew Ninja, her pet squirrel who died some years back that she kept in the freezer in case a student came along who knew taxidermy.

Throughout her 21-year tenure at MSMS – from the school’s official opening in 1987 to her death in 2010 – she always kept students on their toes with her unexpected friends.

“On the first day of cell biology during the fall semester of my junior year, we were in the big lab room at the end of Hooper, across from Dr. Mac’s classroom,” said Ann Marie Picone, class of 2009. “It was filled with interesting fish tanks and terrariums, and we had no idea what was inside them. Dr. Davidson read through the syllabus and did all the typical first day of class items before she walked to one of the tanks, pulled out a rock and returned to the front of the class. She

then picked up a pencil and started tapping the rock and poking the holes in it. We had no idea what she was doing until two of the biggest Madagascar hissing cockroaches I’ve ever seen came crawling out onto her hand. She calmly let them crawl around her hands as she kept telling us about all the work in store for us in cell biology. I’ll never forget that day - it stands out as a moment that perfectly encapsulates the crazy, wonderful place that was MSMS.”

While most of us associate cats and Dr. D with dissection lab, she loved them, as she did most animals in general, beyond their educational purposes. “Junior year, my roommate and I decided we were independent enough to have a pet, so we adopted a cat and brought it “home” to Fant Hall, said Lee Katherine Hutchison Herczogh, class of 1994 . “Who knows what we were thinking. We were inevitably found out, and when I lamented my case to Dr. Davidson, she told me to tell Charlotte she would take the cat. She did, and she took it to live with her niece.”

After her passing in 2010, her lab and equipment were dedicated to her memory in hopes that generations to come would feel her passion for science, love of research and kindness toward every living thing, no matter where they’ve come from or where they’re going.