Deep Roots in Community and Monmouth University

Like the roots of a great oak tree, Maxine ‘74M and Thomas Daniels ‘75M HN ‘01 have been a grounding force of strength and endurance in their community. Now both 88, they reflected back in an interview during Black History Month in February, on their 60 years of service.

From founding the African American Heritage Association of Monmouth County in an effort to preserve and share their history to facilitating the Program for Acceleration in Computer Science Careers (PAC) along with their son, Daryl ‘82M, in partnership with Monmouth in 1984, they have remained steadfast to helping others with grace, courage and humor since moving to Neptune in 1950 and graduating with master’s degrees from Monmouth College in the 1970s.

Maxine and Thomas have passed on their legacy of service to their seven children, all of whom have at least one college degree, 22 grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren, and one great-great grandchild, and to many others beyond their immediate family circle.

Following in their parents’ footsteps, two of their sons also attained master’s degrees from Monmouth. Larrick ‘93M ‘03M is a technology coach in the Asbury Park High School, having been named “Teacher of the Year” who championed a Career Development Program adopted by the Board of Education. Daryl ‘82M is an adjunct faculty member of both the University of Phoenix and Park University in Tennessee. He is also an insurance broker.
Strong Foundations Build Strong Community

“What we wanted to do was to give the truth about the accomplishments of blacks to this country,” Thomas said. “You can do whatever you want to do, but you have to dream it and you have to work it.”

Even with big dreams and a dedication to work, Daniels said he and his wife, Maxine, never forget who helped them along the way and eventually enabled them to serve as role models for leaders of tomorrow.

“We were farmers. We were iron makers. We built those wrought iron fences. We built the White House. We built Congress,” Thomas said.

Maxine and Thomas were recognized last year, along with their longtime friend and colleague, Howard West, with Trailblazer Awards from Neptune Township. West, a former Monmouth College student, went on to become a school principal in Asbury Park and later president of the Asbury Park-Neptune chapter of the NAACP.

“We are called trailblazers because we envisioned things that other people never heard of,” Maxine said. “We stepped outside of the box and did things that no one else wanted to do.”

“We’ is what is important. We need to respect each other and learn from each other,” she added.

Mutual respect and a shared determination to help others are what have guided the Daniels and West toward making a profound impact on members of their community—especially younger members, for so many years.

“Yes, maybe I receive a lot of recognition,” West said. “But it was because of what they [the Daniels] did in the background that pushed the leadership this far. Cooperation is a key factor of anything that’s going on in our communities today.”

“I’m inspired by Tom and Maxine. They are the community’s role model,” West added.

Thomas attributes the honors and recognition he and Maxine have received in part to the education they received at Monmouth.

“We know that the quality of education in Monmouth University’s graduate program greatly enhanced our capabilities in the advancement of our careers and services to our church, our youth, and to the communities in which we live,” he said.

Thomas envisioned blazing trails early on when at the age of six he dreamed of flying airplanes. “Then, I decided I would build airplanes. Then I got tired of building somebody else’s model, so I built my own. Then as I went along, I realized that I wasn’t going to be able to fly airplanes and that I really wanted to design airplanes.”

He never lost sight of his dreams. He continued to blaze his trail in the 1940s when he was recognized for his intelligence and talents in the segregated Kentucky high school he attended and selected to participate in the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program as part of the Enlisted Reserve, which meant a free ride to college.

“I had been taught all of my life you’re inferior because you’re black. I learned quickly that wasn’t so.”

“I was competing against the cream of the crop. In order to get into the program, you had to score higher at that time than the score for getting into officer’s training school,” Thomas said.

After being discharged from the Army in 1946, he returned to the University of Iowa where he began his studies to attain a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering in 1948.
Technology Career for Thomas

Thomas retired from the Army as a space technology executive after 38 years of service, 35 of which were spent at Fort Monmouth and its military base, Camp Evans. He was the deputy director as well as the director of the Combat Surveillance and Target Acquisition Laboratory.

Only the second African American to serve as a research director, he specialized in systems development, systems integration, digital computers, electronic warfare systems, navigation systems, satellite systems, ground surveillance radars, and meteorological data systems.

After leaving Fort Monmouth, Thomas worked at the Pentagon, providing principal advice, assistance and guidance as special assistant to the director for Space and Strategic Systems.

In addition to the numerous civic awards he has received, Thomas has won many professional awards including two Aviation Research and Development Command Commander’s Awards, Secretary of the Army Award for Outstanding Achievement in Equal Employment Opportunity, the University of Iowa Distinguished Service Award and a Distinguished Service Award by his fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi.

He also holds the Department of the Army Exceptional Civilian Service Award and the Meritorious Civilian Service Award, which is the Army’s second-highest civilian award, for his technical and managerial skills. In 2010 Daniels became a member of the Wall of Honor for the InfoAge Science History Learning Center and Museum at Camp Evans.

Maxine’s Career in Education

Maxine retired in 1986 after 30 years in education. After becoming her high school valedictorian in Texas, she catapulted her career into teaching music in Texas and Tennessee early on and then starting in Neptune and Asbury Park in the early 1950s. By 1970 she was the guidance counselor for the new Asbury Park Middle School, later becoming chair of the guidance department.

She is the founder of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Alumni Chapter, Lambda Omega Omega and was proud to participate in the March on Washington in 1963.

Throughout her career, Maxine was an active member of many community organizations including the Asbury Park-Neptune NAACP for whom she served as the first vice president; Black Issues Convention; Monmouth County Human Relations Commission Science, Mathematics, Aeronautics, Research and Technology (S.M.A.R.T.); Pan African Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and co-founder of the African-American Heritage Association.

Like Thomas, Maxine has received numerous awards including the NAACP “Woman of the Year” award in 1996. She is also listed in a number of “Who’s Who” titles, and along with Thomas, the Daniels became the first couple selected for the Asbury Park-Neptune NAACP’s Hall of Fame, which was established in 2012. She was also chosen as one of the July 2012 Pioneers in Unheard Voices magazine.

Still Active in Community

After so many years of service, one might think that Maxine and Thomas are now ready to ease up on their commitment to volunteering, but anyone who knows them well knows otherwise.

“We’re not just here blowing smoke,” Thomas said. “We’re here because we’re concerned.”

Every first and third Sunday, the Daniels help children become better citizens as part of a program they organized at their church, St. Stephen A.M.E. Zion Church in Asbury Park, called “Grandparents Forum.”
"We want to help these grandparents help their children," said Thomas.

The Daniels have also remained involved in the Program for Acceleration in Computer Science Careers program, which celebrated its 30th anniversary last year. The program, which provides more science and computer science opportunities to minorities, is sponsored by the Asbury Park-Neptune Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity who first partnered with Monmouth University in 1985.

That partnership with Monmouth University’s School of Science still exists today, serving children in Monmouth and Ocean Counties from third to 12th grade. To help facilitate this program, the Daniels’ home parish, St. Stephen’s, provides two buses to transport 20 children from the Asbury Park area to the PAC program on the Monmouth campus.

The PAC program consists of two 10-week sessions on the Monmouth campus during the school year, starting in the fall and concluding in the spring. Working with a dedicated group of instructors, tutors, and parents, participating students gain experience with computers including software applications, NXT Robotics, mathematics, life skills, and problem-solving techniques.

“We also believe in parent involvement,” said Thomas who added that parents in the program are also encouraged to learn computer science or sit in on his daughter-in-law, Kay-Kay’s math class or his grandson’s science program.

In all, about 10 members of the Daniels family have taught in the program, and at least 12 children and grandchildren have participated in the program. One of their grandsons, Kwesi Daniels, a doctoral student at Temple University and member of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, teaches architecture, sustainability science, mathematics and SAT prep.

Thomas and Maxine Daniels have worked together and supported each other for over 60 years, nurturing new growth in every facet of their lives. Their determination and dedication to their family and community is indelible, and the resulting impact is infinite. Whether it is creating a new program that fosters opportunities for children or conquering an illness that many would have succumbed to, the Daniels face each challenge together, never forgetting to share a smile or a laugh or a thank you. M