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EDUCATION PROFILE

### Black History Pioneer Is More Than An Achiever; She's A Visionary Leader

BY DR. CLAUDIA V. SCHRADER

February is Black History Month, and it is a time when we raise awareness of the history of Blacks in America, their achievements, contributions and role in shaping American history. Earlier this month, I was honored to speak to one such woman who both contributed to and shaped the history of CUNY/Kingsborough Community College (KCC).

The first time I met Dr. Thelma Malle was at an intimate breakfast in late 2018 for the Kingsborough Community College 1963 Society, our distinguished group of loyal and prolific college donors. Although my 5'10" frame towered over her, she, I would come to learn, was the real giant.

Thelma London Malle was born in Harlem to Barbadian parents. She attended New York City public schools and earned a bachelor's degree at Columbia University and her master's and doctorate degrees from New York University. She wanted to major in Chemistry, but she could not tolerate the fumes in the lab during her organic chemistry class, and subsequently changed her major to mathematics. Often, she was the only Black woman in her classes



Dr. Thelma Malle, left, and President Claudia Schrader meet for the first time in November 2018 before the KCC 1963 Society Breakfast.

and shared with me that she was fortunate not to have ever confront the racism or sexism that others had experienced. She ultimately received her undergraduate degree in mathematical statistics from Columbia University. She used her degree to teach mathematics both in junior high schools and at Kingsborough upon her arrival in 1965. But she wouldn't stay in the classroom long, as she was appointed as the dean of the Mid Brooklyn Campus. Before

retiring from KCC in 1998, she would serve as the Dean of Academic Programs and Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science.

As she reflected on her time at Kingsborough, she cited helping students who were at the brink of dropping out "hang on" and complete their associate degrees among her greatest accomplishments. She recounted to me a story of a student who was incarcerated who wrote to her and asked her to do two things:

contact his mother, and because he had done work at KCC, send his transcript. Dr. Malle was able to help, and the student went on to finish his degree while incarcerated. When he was released, he obtained a master's and a doctorate degree and became a university professor. He, Dr. Malle said, was an example of someone who the world wanted to throw away, but he saw the value in himself. Dr. Malle credits her belief in other people, and the goodness of others, that made it possible for her to be successful.

We talked too, about the successes of other African American women who were also firsts like Vice President Kamala Harris whom she described as an excellent person. Dr. Malle shared that in the '70s and '80s she and others tried so hard to have students have a sense of their value to progress. So, she is extremely proud of what Vice President Harris has accomplished by reaching one of the highest levels in government. She stands, Dean Malle said, as a "wonderful representative of women and women of color." And she even had a few words of advice for me as the first African American and first African American woman president of

Kingsborough; she told me to believe in myself and know that I have a role to play because there are students who need someone who supports and understands them. She reminded me that I am a person of consequence, and it is my calling to make a difference in the lives of others.

My intent on profiling Dean Malle for Black History Month was to highlight this woman who became the first Black dean of Kingsborough Community College. But her place in Black History is so much more than the achievement of being first, it is about helping students achieve. Today, in the midst of her continued civic activities, including her immeasurable philanthropic gifts to Kingsborough, she continues to do the work of helping others to achieve. She is Black History; not for what she did, but for all that she has and continues to do for others.

*Dr. Claudia V. Schrader is president of Kingsborough Community College, a 72-acre academic oasis located in beautiful Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn that offers students affordable two-year degrees for their future. For more information on the College visit [www.Kingsborough.edu](http://www.Kingsborough.edu).*

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