Urban Planning Student Left Auto Plant to Pursue Studies

Tom Cox was on the brink of realizing the traditionally Detroit version of the American Dream. Working as an electrician in the auto industry, he had a job that offered a comfortable salary, paid vacations, and good health insurance. But when the auto industry began downsizing, the buyout package that interested him most was the one that would provide him with the means to change his life. He was happy working in a factory? At age thirty-three, was he too old for a career change? He hadn't decided on a field of study when he enrolled at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He simply chose subjects he would enjoy—philosophy, the history of the 1960s, and urban geography. Urban geography had an immediate effect on him. Upon learning of the negative impacts of poorly-designed American cities, he was motivated to learn more so that he could make positive changes not only in his own life, but eventually in the lives of others. He was concerned about the practice of neglecting inner cities, along with the related environmental damage caused by urban sprawl. He decided on a major—urban planning—and transferred to Wayne State.

Tom says that he chose WSU mainly because of the urban experience it offers, with close proximity to the cultural center and its artistic offerings. After being away from an academic environment for over a decade, he found it difficult to regain his writing and comprehension skills. However, Tom says that “I found the instructors very willing to help me learn to become a good student again.” In particular, he credits departmental Lecturer Jeffrey Horner, who “enthusiasm for Urban Studies motivated me to do my best work,” Cox says.

Cox has been busy outside the classroom as well. At the request of Professor Avis Vidal, who taught him Social Geography I, he assisted at the 2008 Brownfields Conference at Cobo Hall, helping planners and other professionals formulate a plan for a Focus Hope project that was being developed in Highland Park. In the summer of 2009, Cox completed a “Cool Cities” internship in downtown Detroit, assisting with an annual tour and helping to produce a brochure to promote the Workers’ Row House museum. Overall, Cox says, his studies have taught him that “post-World War II planning practices were horribly misguided, and that rising energy costs combined with environmental concerns demand more responsible planning.” The former auto worker puts it simply: “We need to plan densely populated cities that lessen our dependence on automobiles.”

Africana Studies Alumna and McNair Scholar Pursues PhD

Markeysha Davis was born and raised on the west side of Detroit. Like her three siblings, she attended Detroit Public Schools for her primary and secondary education. After graduating magna cum laude from Cass Technical High School in 2002, she began attending Wayne State University with a major in Journalism. She was afforded the opportunity to attend Wayne State with an academic scholarship—the Wade Mc Cree, Jr. Scholarship—that she received in her third year at Charles R. Drew Middle School. It covered her tuition for four years at WSU. As a Detroit Compact Scholar, she received another four-year award to apply to her WSU fees. She was also aided, in her last year, by the Pamela Anise Tinsley Scholarship awarded by the WSU Department of Africana Studies.

Markeysha initially majored only in journalism. But she always had a passion for African American history, literature, and politics. In second grade, she won first place—a 10-speed bicycle—for a paper she wrote on Ralph Bunche. In middle school, when her peers were writing Black History Month papers on Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman, Markeysha wrote about a less famous historical figure, Denmark Vesey, the alleged conspirator of a failed slave rebellion in Virginia in 1822. She viewed her interests in journalism and in African American history as separate before arriving on campus. “Only when I got to WSU,” Davis says, “did I find out that I could study in the field of Africana Studies, apply it to my journalism projects, and, ultimately, become a scholar in the field.” She credits Helen Ditouras, then a PhD student in English, and English lecturer Lavell Todd Duncan for encouraging her to become an Africana Studies major during her sophomore year. Professors Melba Boyd, Ollie Johnson, and Eboe Hutchful of Africana Studies were encouraging and instrumental to her success in that department. In the Journalism Department, she credits Jack Lessenberry, who recommended that she work at the Michigan Chronicle, one of the Detroit’s two African American newspapers, as it would benefit both of her majors. “My true turning point at WSU,” Davis says, “came from my acceptance into the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program.” The McNair Program aims to prepare students for graduate school. “Through this program,” Davis says, “I was able to fine-tune my research interests as well as present research to audiences of my peers from across the country.” The program eventually led her to apply to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she was accepted into the doctoral program in the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies with a concentration in African American Literature and Culture. With her acceptance came a fully-funded fellowship.

Davis graduated magna cum laude from WSU in May 2007. “To this day,” she says, “the moment I walked across the stage at Adams Field is the proudest moment of my life.” Now in her third year of doctoral studies, she will be taking her comprehensive exams next September. When done with those, she will receive her Masters in Afro-American Studies, becoming the first in her family to earn a post-baccalaureate degree. For her dissertation, she plans on writing about the black power literature of the 1960s and 1970s, probably centered in Detroit and post-baccalaureate degree. For her dissertation, she plans on writing about the black power literature of the 1960s and 1970s, probably centered in Detroit and Ferguson, Missouri.

In addition to taking three classes, she is currently a discussion leader in an African American literature class of 74 students. She is also on the board of faculty and students planning a Black Power and Black Arts Conference for 2010, part of a celebration of her department’s 40th anniversary. Additionally, she is chair of the university’s Black Graduate Student’s Organization. “I have not slowed down since I left Wayne State,” Davis says, “for better or for worse.” She adds, laughing: “In my opinion, it is for the better. Anything less and I’d go mad. I blame WSU for putting that drive in me.”