

“I was dreaming piano,” Auburn University choir professor pursued music well

Caroline Rice

The walls of Goodwin Hall are dated and bland. Built in 1974, the halls sing the songs of a prior generation that studied music at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. The part of Goodwin Hall that makes its visitors want to stop in their tracks is the sounds of the hall; the clarinetist rehearsing her solo piece in the recital hall, the pianist flying through his scales in the practicing room, the band enhancing their dynamics in the old band hall. If you walk down the first hall and take a right, you will hear the deep and joyful laugh of a man that makes you want to peek through the crack in the double doors to a seemingly large room. Looking inside, you see levels filled with seats with spaced-out students and opened music binders whose eyes are lit up and locked in with the voice that you hear. Shifting your gaze to the front of the choir hall, you see a tall man with chestnut skin and a bald head, and for some reason, you trust this man as if you have known him for years. You sense the passion in the room; you see the cues from the man at the front of the room, but you hear the life of the people.

Dr. William Powell is long and lanky, towering over me and others at six feet and four inches. His posture is slightly bent over, an attempt to meet others at their height to eliminate anyone's intimidation at his height. Rectangle glasses softly shape his warm brown eyes as visions of his past lead his stare to the wall beside me as his words get slower and more pronounced when remembering these memories that seem so vivid that I can see the reflection of them dancing in his glistening eyes.

Davis Mann, a student of Dr. Powell's, describes his personality using the scene of his office: cluttered with music and papers, maybe, but always open, nevertheless. A reclining chair is waiting for a student to relax and pour out the songs of their souls, both burdens and joys, of as Dr. Powell sits in his ridged office chair, deeply caring about each word out of his students' mouths. Humble, as Mann describes Dr. Powell, is the tone that his recliner whistles as its cushioned arms are spread wide, mirroring the man himself.

Mann said that Dr. Powell not only uses his voice to give instruction to his students, but uses his body as well, dancing with his long limbs to lead his students to where they need to be.

And I, sitting across from him at his modest office table that is made up of smaller wooden tables, saw a glimpse into the heart of Dr. William Powell.

Growing up in Americus, Georgia, Dr. Powell was the only black member of his high school quartet. His childhood house on North Lee Street was modest but treasured; the three pecan trees that cornered the yard served as bases for countless baseball games. But, Camille Powell, his daughter, describes the demographics of his hometown as ‘creating stereotypical limitations’ because of his skin color.

“Limitations that I think he was able to break,” said Camille.

A late-blooming prodigy on the keys, Powell began playing the piano as a sophomore in high school. With a fresh passion for music, Powell desired to study piano in college, but discovered the unlikeliness of a student getting into college for music after playing his instrument for only two and a half years.

So, he leaned into his music as his music leaned back into him. His family would be irritated as high school-aged Powell flew through his school assignments only to run to the piano to practice for hours in the evenings, where his heart lied. If his parents would have allowed, he would have played all through the night, but the house had to sleep. And so did he.

“I was dreaming piano,” Powell said.

Just when Powell thought his chasing after his dream just couldn’t ever be fast enough, hard enough, or ever enough, he met Kay Pace.

Kay Pace is a pistol of a choral conducting teacher at Alabama State University who saved Powell’s musical dreams. She never married; she was married to the music, as Powell described, and her students were her babies. Taking Powell under her wing, he learned from the pearls of wisdom that flowed out of her mouth.

“Don’t put off tomorrow what you can do today,” Pace would say, and what Powell now says in his choir room.

At each mention of Powell’s wife and two daughters, which is many, his face glows with a humble fatherly pride, and a soft smile is radiant enough to shine through the cloth mask that he wears.

Camille Powell, the oldest daughter of Dr. Powell, explains the inner workings of his patient heart. A value for time draws Dr. Powell to make the most out of every minute, including those in the waiting.

“Patience is about the attitude and heart posture while waiting, and I feel like my dad is good about giving people patience,” Camille said.

When others learn that Camille is the daughter of Dr. Powell, praises of their professor, director, mentor, or friend are sung to his daughter. Their songs are ones of people that have been molded by the wisdom of Dr. Powell, molded by the compassionate and gentle hands of a master sculptor.

After years of pushing himself to be around others with his career that is focused outward, Dr. Powell has disguised his introverted nature as a more outgoing one. But I suppose when you care for people so deeply and are consistently around your sea of mentees, the depth of your ocean must be widened and filled with electric currents of love.

Auburn University felt the currents made by Dr. Powell as his students are changed, his peers are challenged, and his friends are served by the choral master himself.

Dr. Powell is the most recent recipient of the Charles W. Barkley Endowed Professorship, which is given to two Auburn University professors each year in celebration of their commitment to diversity among Auburn faculty. While Dr. Powell is humble and will not brag on himself unless begged to, he recognizes that it does feel good to have others appreciate his efforts.

“Receiving the Charles Barkley Endowed Professorship affirms my contributions as an African American faculty member,” Powell said.

The funds that Dr. Powell has been awarded with through this endowment will be used toward serving as a consultant to high school choirs at no cost, as well as providing funds for research materials for gospel music and anthems that Dr. Powell is co-authoring with his wife, according to an interview by Auburn University.

All of this fame and fortune leads Dr. William Powell back to his memories in the house on North Lee with the pecan tree bases.

“His childhood has caused him to have such a major effect on his students, especially his minority students, because he wants them to have many more opportunities to succeed and break stereotypes in ways that he had to push for, by himself, or with limited resources and help,” said Camille.

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“Pair of esteemed professors react to receiving Barkley Endowed Professorships”

http://ocm.auburn.edu/newsroom/news_articles/2021/02/260906-barkley-professorships-announced.php?ref=hpslider