

# UCF Professor Retires after 52 years in education

*After spending 52 years in education, including more than 30 years at UCF, Stewart is preparing for her next chapter: retirement.*

Story Submitted by  
University of central florida

If one word could encapsulate the journey that Martha Lue Stewart has had at UCF, it’s grateful. As the professor submitted grades for her final course last week and packed up the books, photos and other mementos in her office, she reminisced on countless stories.

As the first Black woman promoted to the rank of professor at UCF, Stewart has been instrumental in helping build a diverse and inclusive campus. Early on, she served as chair of the Diversity Programming Committee that organizes events like Diversity Week.



Photo submitted by Amy Floyd

**Martha Lue Stewart, the first Black woman promoted to the rank of professor at UCF, retired on August 7.**

Stewart was also actively involved in the Black Faculty

and Staff Association, where she served as president from 1998–99. Her first service project with the association involved launching the university’s first Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration.

“I enjoyed having a place where I could meet other colleagues of color,” she says. “It felt like a family and that’s amazing.”

Stewart also helped name the student center in honor of the late John T. Washington, one of UCF’s first Black faculty members who was influential at the university. More recently, Stewart worked with three other faculty members to develop an initiative that earned UCF a spot as the only higher education institution on a campaign for the Delta Research and Education Foundation, which supports scholastic achievement for African American women. The Teachers Advocating to Lead Great Change initiative emphasizes culturally responsive instruction among teacher leaders to ensure more equitable outcomes for all children.

Additionally, Stewart has held various leadership roles at the local, regional and national levels as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

“It’s been an incredible journey,” Stewart says. “I’m so grateful for my family [and my] professional and personal networks. My colleagues and students have taught me so much over the years. I hope that people can see me as a role model and that I strived every day not to disappoint.”

### Striving for the Dream of a Degree

Growing up in Monticello, Florida, Stewart was the last child born in her family but was the first one to complete college.

“Daddy was a sharecropper and worked on 50 acres of heirs property. He also was a self-taught barber and carpenter,” she says. “Men were expected to till the soil from the age of 5, so many never had a formal education.”

As Stewart and her siblings grew older, they took turns helping their father learn how to read and memorize information that he found important. Stewart’s role was teaching him how to write. One of her fondest memories was working with her father on his signature — taking it from an “X” to his name.

Stewart’s mother attended school up until the sixth grade. In addition to working as a domestic, her mother was very skilled at sewing, and made most of their clothes. Stewart remembers her being a gifted writer and holding various leadership positions at the local church.

Helping her parents from a young age fueled Stewart’s passion for teaching and was just the beginning of her educational journey.

While attending the only Black school in her community, former students and current teachers encouraged her to dream of going to college — and acknowledge the world of possibilities outside of Jefferson County.

“When I was in elementary and middle school, previous students would come home during college break, and the school held an assembly. I looked forward to hearing about what college was like and always sat near to hear their stories,” she says. “In high school, teachers would take students to cultural events — exposing us to plays, concerts, band and competitions throughout the state.”

After high school, Stewart attended Suwannee River Junior College — now North Florida Community College, in Madison, Florida. It was near her hometown and gave her two more years to stay at home. She then transferred to Florida A&M University where she earned a bachelor’s in speech language pathology. It was there that a professor, who was also her advisor, recommended her for a graduate fellowship to the University of Missouri, as well as to Purdue University. Stewart received both but chose the University of Missouri because it also included a housing allowance.

“I had never traveled out of the state,” she says. “But my parents were determined to help me achieve my dream. So, my mom got me a train ticket and I headed to my new home, the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. I had never been to a place that large and learned to navigate my way in a city and university where I didn’t know anyone. It’s been one of my highlights of my professional career.”

Upon earning her master’s degree, Stewart set out to do even more. She went on to achieve an education specialist degree in learning disabilities from Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, and achieved her doctorate in special education administration from the University of Florida.

“Both of my parents were there for each graduation through my master’s degree,” Stewart says. “It meant so much to me. I wanted them to see me — I wanted to make them proud. I was so thankful because without them, I never would have been able to go to college.”

### Helping Lead the Charge at UCF

In the final semester of her doctoral program, a professor informed Stewart of a visiting professor opportunity available at UCF. She decided to take a weekday trip to learn more about the position at a school she never knew existed.



Photo submitted

**Martha Lue Stewart’s parents, Rachel and Solomon Scott.**

“I took the East-West Expressway to a two-lane road. There weren’t many buildings or things around — all trees for miles,” she says.

In 1981, early in her postdoctoral career, she started her role as a visiting assistant professor at UCF. Four years later, Stewart received a junior faculty fellowship position at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education in Washington, D.C., where she studied the underrepresentation of teachers of color in the nation’s schools. Then in 1989, she made the move back to Florida after accepting an assistant professor role at UCF — where she helped the new undergraduate program in exceptional student education flourish — and has been at the university since.

“My work has led to a greater understanding and appreciation of leveling the playing field so that every child will have a champion,” she says. “It has also better prepared teachers to effectively teach all students — all learners, including those from underserved, underfunded and under-resourced communities.”

In addition to teaching courses in exceptional student education, Stewart was a lead researcher on a state-funded grant designed to address preventative strategies in decreasing situational and environmental circumstances that impede the growth and development of young Black men. Most recently, Stewart served as the program coordinator for the supporting high needs populations graduate certificate. The program not only looks at children and their families through the lens of education but other interdisciplinary services as well.

“Martha Lue Stewart’s passion, deep commitment and tireless efforts created a legacy within the UCF, Central Florida and national communities,” says Mary Little, UCF professor and program coordinator in exceptional student education. “Her leadership, mentorship, community engagement and continued advocacy impact so many. Each of us honored to know and collaborate with Martha Lue Stewart and we will continue her vision for equity and social justice within our communities.”

### Making a Mark for Years to Come

Writing, traveling, and spearheading educational initiatives across the community are just some of the plans Stewart has in mind for retirement.

Since 2003 — and roughly every other year over spring break — a ministry of Stewart’s church has sponsored an educational, history and cultural tour. Stewart often joins the 40 children, youth and adults as they tour various parts of the United States and visit historical markers to learn more about their African American history. And now, in retirement, she hopes to become more actively involved in the program and prepare lesson plans and other materials to provide along the journey.

“In 2019, 46 members of the church and members of the community retraced the footprints of the underground railroad,” she says. “The 6-day tour took us from Detroit, Michigan, where we visited a congregational church that served as one of the ‘safe havens’ for enslaved persons to St. Catharines, Ontario, where we explored the British Methodist Episcopal Church, Salem Chapel, where Harriet Tubman worshiped while in Canada. At our final stop, each youth participant presented on some of the historical figures that they learned about during the trip, including Will Still, Josiah Henson, John Morrison, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman.”

Additionally, Stewart will continue working with community partners on her seminal work that focuses on grandparents as primary caregivers. She also plans to set up reading posts throughout underserved communities which will provide a space where children and their families can gather to read a book, discuss it and when completed, take it home to be part of their own library.

While Stewart will no longer have an office or classes at UCF, she isn’t saying goodbye forever. She plans to continue helping with dissertations and will keep in touch with colleagues and students. As someone who worked under every president of the university except Charles Millican — the university’s first president — she has seen the growth and achievements first-hand.

“UCF is our hometown university, which has taken giant leaps to become more inclusive and diverse,” she says. “Here, you have an opportunity to blaze your own path, make new connections and dream bigger than you ever imagined.”

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