

The Elevation of **MORRIS COLLEGE**

BY DR. JAMAL WATSON

Dr. Said Sewell has an open-door policy on Fridays, and he means it literally.

No appointment necessary. By mid-morning, 15 or 20 students have wandered into his office at Morris College, some to watch television, some just to sit. There's no agenda. His chief of staff—Danita Pearl—known to students simply as Ms. Pearl, hosts alongside him. The students call it “hanging out with Prez.”

It is a small ritual, easy to miss in any accounting of a college presidency measured in enrollment figures and fundraising totals. But talk to Sewell for more than a few minutes, and it becomes clear that this is where he locates the real work of leading a historically Black college—not in the boardroom, but in the doorway.

“We have to be able to impact and touch these students so that they know that there’s somebody who cares for them,” Sewell said in a recent conversation with The HBCU Times, “and will encourage them and help move them to where they want to be in their future careers.”

Sewell became the 11th president of Morris College on July 1, 2024, arriving at the small Baptist-founded institution in Sumter, South Carolina that was, by his own account, in a fragile state. He is now entering his third year, and the story he tells about that stretch of time is nothing short of extraordinary, most

notably, an enrollment that had fallen to roughly 344 students, down from a high of about 1,050 under an earlier president. People were openly asking, Sewell recalled, whether Morris would survive.

That question shaped what he calls his first agenda item: elevation. He set out to raise enrollment, retention and morale among students and faculty alike. He also aspired to raise the college’s name recognition beyond the boundaries of the Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention of South Carolina, which has supported the school for more than a century, but which Sewell is candid about seeing as an insufficient foundation for the future. “The churches are great. They support us,” he said. “However, we cannot depend just on the churches to continue to keep Morris alive.”

Two years into that push, Sewell points to enrollment climbing back to about 469 students and a retention rate that rose from roughly 41 percent to close to 72 percent. The college brought in just under \$5 million in outside support over the past year, he said, from alumni, corporate donors and the federal government—support he credits in part to U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, whose parents both attended Morris and whom Sewell calls, admiringly, the closest thing Congress has to “Mr. HBCU.”

Sewell now describes the college as moving past elevation into what he calls a “movement,” organized around four pillars he refers to as the four M’s: mission, mastery, modernization and mobilization. The last of those, he





said, will occupy much of the remaining years of his contract, which includes an effort to pull corporate America and the broader Sumter community into a role historically filled almost entirely by Black Baptist congregations that are themselves shrinking, a trend the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated.

Sewell's path to Sumter runs through some of the most recognizable names in Black higher education. A 1992 political science graduate of Morehouse College, he later returned there as vice president for student affairs, and along the way held posts at Lincoln University of Missouri, Kent State, Fort Valley State, the University of West Georgia, Georgia Tech, the University of Nebraska, Clark Atlanta and Albany State. It was at West Georgia, a predominantly white institution, that he built a mentoring program for Black male students that grew to serve more than 200 young men—a program, he noted with some disbelief, whose earliest participants are now in their mid-40s.

He describes his arrival at Morris as a kind of homecoming.

"Although I did not attend Morris, I feel as if this is really the seminal experience for me," he said, "because Morris is so much like Morehouse—a small, tightly focused HBCU built around moving students from where they are to where they want to be."

He offered an example that has stayed with him: a student who arrived at Morris from Moncks Corner, South Carolina, with little money and a difficult path behind her. She was the first in her family to attend college. A Morris College professor told her, at a moment when she was ready to quit, that she could make it. She is a teacher now. "That, to me, is why Morris College is so emblematic of what the best of HBCUs is really about," Sewell said.

He was equally direct about what he sees as distinguishing an HBCU from other institutions where he has worked, including predominantly white ones. He described a recent night when a freshman's father died and, before the young man's own mother had reached him with the news, his basketball coach at Morris was already at his dorm room door.

"That doesn't happen at many other institutions," Sewell said. "But it happens at Morris."

When Sewell was welcomed to campus in July 2024, that sense of urgency was already part of the public conversation around his arrival. Rev. Dr. Jamey O. Graham, a 1998 Morris graduate who was newly elected president of the Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention of South Carolina at the time, told those gathered for Sewell's arrival that keeping HBCUs like Morris open was essential, particularly amid

political pushback in South Carolina against the teaching of Black history. Morris College Board of Trustees chair Dr. Phillip M. Baldwin, in a statement issued by the board, said trustees were confident Sewell's leadership would inspire the campus community and advance the college's mission—a new chapter, the board said, promising growth and continued excellence.

Sewell does not describe his own role as elevated above that community. He returns, instead, to the founding story of the institution he now leads. It's the narrative of J.J. Durham, a physician and one of 22 Black Baptist ministers and laypeople who, rebuffed at a national convention in the late 1800s and told they'd have to build their own schools, went home to South Carolina and did exactly that.

To understand what Sewell means when he talks about standing on the shoulders of those who came before him, it helps to know what his predecessor, Dr. Luns Richardson, did with Morris College over nearly half a century. Richardson arrived in 1974 at a moment not unlike the one Sewell inherited. The college was in financial turmoil, its enrollment thin. Over the next 43 years, he built Morris into something sturdier, expanding the academic program with more than a dozen new majors, overseeing the construction of 17 buildings, adding an Army ROTC unit, and growing the endowment from roughly \$30,000 to more than \$10 million. By the time he retired in 2017, at age 88, he had become not just Morris College's longest-serving president but South Carolina's longest-serving college president of any institution, Black or white—a distinction the college later marked by renaming its main entrance road Dr. Luns C. Richardson Boulevard and installing a bronze statue of him on campus. It is against that 43-year arc—nearly half a century of one man's stewardship—that Sewell now measures his own third year.

"I have to pinch myself some days," Sewell said of the school's 118-year history and helming the institution once led by Richardson, "knowing that I am sitting in the very place that he lived."

