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- Yolanda Dixon, Junior League of Baton Rouge president

Chatting after a meeting of the Junior League of Baton Rouge’s Community Advisory Board at the Cameo Club are, from left, Suzette Say, Meg Gerald, Yolanda Dixon, Sara Downing and Melissa deGeneres. Dixon is the first African-American president of the local league.

A League of Her Own

Dixon makes history at BR Junior League

By DANNY HEITMAN

In 1993, Yolanda Dixon accepted an invitation to become a member of the Junior League of Baton Rouge. It was a decision that would bring big changes to Dixon’s life — and even bigger changes to the league itself.

Earlier this year, Dixon became the first African-American president of the local league, an event that didn’t surprise the woman who brought Dixon to the league nearly a decade ago.

“What struck me about Yolanda when I first met her is that she’s an incredibly sincere person with very strong leadership skills,” said Mary Beth Chevaller, who asked Dixon to join the league and observed her steady rise to the organization’s top post.

Though only a handful of African-American women were members of the local league when Dixon joined, Dixon’s ascendance has underscored the organization’s willingness to welcome diversity, Chevaller said.

“She’s the kind of person that everyone would want as a friend. And she’s always got a beautiful smile on her face. She’s handed her leadership skills on to other women who’ve become the presidents,” Chevaller said.

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As one of Baton Rouge’s oldest and most distinguished women’s service organizations, the Junior League has, through much of its history, had a reputation as an organization for affluent, stay-at-home wives.

But that reputation is a false one, Dixon said.

“It’s a perception that’s totally wrong, because 75 percent of our membership works,” said Dixon, who noted that she’s not the first Junior League president with a full-time job.

But Dixon is the first African-American woman to hold the local league’s highest leadership post, a milestone of which she is well aware.

“I think my biggest contribution to the Junior League has been to put a different face on it,” Dixon said.

“Here’s an African-American woman who works. If I can get women to look at the Junior League and say, ‘What is this organization? What does it do?’ then I’ll feel that I’ve made a contribution.”

As Junior League president, Dixon oversees a membership of some 490 active members and a budget of $480,000. And she does it on her own time, while continuing to work a demanding job at the State Capitol.

Additionally, Dixon has been active in Volunteers in Public Schools, the Woman’s Hospital Advisory Council, the Arts Council, Delta Sigma Theta and the Young Leaders Academy, among other groups.

“I’ve been trying to cut back,” said Dixon, though those who know her suggest that her goal to scale down is probably easier said than done.

“Some people devote their time to only one organization, but not Yolanda,” Chevaller said. “She has a very big heart — a huge heart. She’s a member of many organizations at the same time.”

“My husband has been very supportive,” said Dixon, who’s been married to interior designer Jimmy Dixon.

Yolanda Dixon, second from left, attends the installation ceremony for her father, Joseph Johnson, center, as president of Talladega College in 1993. Also attending were, from left, Dixon’s sister, Julie and Juliet, and her mother, Lula.
since 1987. She said that not having children has given her some additional flexibility in managing her commitments. "I don't know how people who have children do this," she said.

Yolanda Dixon's first love was journalism. President Joseph Johnson, said that even in her youth, her daughter was an active volunteer. "She really had this thing about volunteer work even when she was in high school," Johnson recalled during a phone conversation from his present home in Atlanta. "She was always vol-
unteerering, and she always wanted to help peo-
ple. We always stressed to our children that you need to give something back."

"She was always a very active person," Dixon's mother, Lula Johnson, recalled. She was a cheerleader in high school, and she liked to read. She also liked to have friends around. She worked as a volunteer at the public library, and they eventually gave her a part-time job as a reward for her interest.

Yolanda Dixon was born on Jan. 6, 1959, in New Orleans. The family would later include a set of triplets - Joseph III, Julie, and Juliet - who are 10 years younger than Dixon.

With three siblings who were a decade younger, Yolanda developed leadership skills early, her mother said. "The younger ones always looked up to her, and they would often ask her for answers to questions before they would ask me," Lula Johnson recalled. "You know why it is - children sometimes think that an older sibling knows things a parent doesn't."

Joseph III is an actuary in Annapolis, Md., and Julie is a Baltimore anesthesiologist. Julie is director of college counseling at Episcopal High School in Baton Rouge.

During Dixon's early years, Joseph Johnson taught high school in Hammond. Dixon's mother worked as an elementary school teacher and, in later years, as an elementary school counselor. Through word and example, both parents emphasized the value of education, Dixon recalled.

"My father's philosophy was that you had to be self-reliant," Dixon said. "You couldn't just depend on others. And the only way to become self-reliant was through education. We lived in Hammond the first 10 years of

- Dixon, Yolanda

"I think that philosophy was as helpful as anything for law school. But I'm grounded in what's real." - Yolanda Dixon, Junior League of Baton Rouge president

my life. Then we moved to Boulder, Colo.," Dixon said.

In Boulder, Joseph Johnson worked at the University of Colorado and pursued two advanced degrees, eventually becoming special assistant to the university president.

With Dixon firmly in check, Joseph Johnson attributed Dixon's future pursuit of law to a formative experience during the family's Colorado years.

"Everyone had chores in our family, and Yolanda had the duty of taking the trash can in. One day, she forgot," Johnson said. "It snowed in Colorado, and we were having a blizzard. So I waited until about 2 a.m., and I went and woke her up and reminded her that she had to go get the trash can in. She told me that she was going to be a lawyer one day so that she could do some-
thing about parents like us."

The Johnsons returned to Louisiana in 1977 when Joseph Johnson became president of Grambling. He would later serve as president of Talledega College in Alabama before retiring to Atlanta. Meanwhile, Dixon became a student at the University of Colorado, graduating in 1985 with a degree in philosophy.

"I always knew that I would go to law school. But my initial idea was that I would be an English major," said Dixon. "I can't tell you why I moved to philosophy, but I did."

Dixon's father recalled that she was intellectually curious from an early age. "I remember how avidly she read as a kid," Johnson said. "After bedtime, she'd be in there under the covers, reading with a flashlight. She read every-
thing. And she still does."

" Initially, it was fine," Dixon said of her law

- Dixon, Yolanda

advances courses, the more I realized that I was a fact-based person. I like facts. It was a little too theoretical for me.

A friend that served Dixon was as helpful as any-
thing for law school," Dixon said. "But I'm grounded in what's real."

Dixon's pragmatism seems evident in her goals as Junior League president. As the league's leader, she's trying to find practical ways to steward the organization's time and money.

Specifically, Dixon wants to do what she can to accommodate league members who are juggling volunteer work with careers. "The challenge now is that nobody has the time," Dixon said. "It's a big commitment. Our members are working. They're working and having families. So that's a challenge that leagues all over the coun-
try are going to be faced with."

Additionally, Dixon wants to build a strong endowment to secure the league's operating budget for the future. "One of the goals is to stabilize our funding sources," she said. "Our endowment is hopefully going to allow our operational expenses to be stabilized so that greater percentage of our fund-raising goes back to the community."

Dixon earned much of her administrative experience at the Louisiana Senate, where she came to work in 1988. Today, she's a Senate counsel and deputy director of the Judiciary and Governmental Affairs Division in the Louisiana Senate Legislative Services. After earning her philosophy degree in Colorado, Dixon returned to Louisiana to get a law degree from Southern University, then worked in the state attorney general's office for several years before going to the Senate.

"Call me crazy, but I like it," Dixon said of her Senate work. "There's a certain intensity to it. It's exciting. It's fast-moving."

Dixon mentioned the potential for public service as a large factor in pointing her toward a law career. "It was probably a desire to help people who needed help and didn't have any other recourse," she said.

A similar desire soared Dixon into volunteer work. "It's just a good feeling - a sense of helping people in whatever way you can," she said.