

FOUR-TIME ALUMNA YVONNE BROWN TALKS ABOUT HOW HER RESEARCH AND HER PAST INFORM HER WORK AS THE INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES MANAGER IN THE FACULTY

“My life is a series of contradictions,” says Yvonne Brown, a recent Doctor of Education graduate in the Faculty of Education whose dissertation critiqued globalization and who is now the international initiatives manager in Education. “Some people feel I have sold out, but given my history in Jamaica and the colonial education I had there, my life is a series of compromises. In the same way I couldn’t escape British colonization, I can’t escape the globalization policies that have emerged at UBC.”

Escape is not Yvonne’s style. Instead, she uses her voice to raise pertinent questions within the university, where she is able to directly affect change. In 2004, Yvonne wrote two responses to UBC’s blueprint for globalization, *Trek 2000*. In the first, she critiqued the absence of Africa from the document and, in the second, she raised social and ethical concerns, such as the barrier high tuition poses to low-income international students and the relevance of the current curricula for international students.

“I want to support students from Third World countries who want to incorporate their traditions and experiences within their education. It is very important to ground scholarly knowledge in who we are.” This statement echoes throughout Yvonne’s life and career, and is manifest in her doctoral dissertation in educational policy and leadership: *Bodies, Memories, and Empire: Life Stories about Growing up in Jamaica 1943–1965*. This book-length work fuses together her life and her research. Yvonne explores the legend of colonization in global education by looking at her own life and addressing the feeling that she believes many individuals experience in educational institutions of having an “absent presence.”

“Throughout my education as a teacher and an academic, I rarely received texts about black or African peoples, and any time a discussion did come up it was in the context of racism. I had a disturbing feeling of living like a ghost in the academy, and yet my body is a physical reminder of a history people would rather forget.”

“Memory is important,” Yvonne says, “and I feel I’ve released a ‘story not to pass

on.’ It reveals so much about me, but I am not the only one with these stories. The tendency is for us to mash our feelings and subvert the truth.” It is easy to understand why. Exploring the truth is not always an easy assignment, and Yvonne’s past took her into memories of being raised without a mother, memories of an abusive father, and memories of the poverty in her homeland.

“Any time I would start to despair, I would go to the library and read and read [about Africa and the Caribbean] until I would get to a place of understanding. Knowledge is power.”

Working within the university, Yvonne has the ability to use that knowledge to engage difficult questions. “I don’t write and publish much, but I do speak and try to make people think about things in a different way. Whatever I do in the academy must have meaning in people’s lives. The power of ideas and spirit of generosity that I witness when I speak to people are my greatest satisfaction.”

This year, Yvonne visited Kenya to explore opportunities for learning exchanges between UBC and Moi University. “The burning question on my conscience was, what could I do while I was visiting to show that I care.” With the help of the UBC community, she raised money for food, four goats, four treadle sewing machines to start a sewing cooperative for AIDS widows at Kanyawegi village, and school supplies for the Oyiengo Primary School. “It can be overwhelming to decide when, where, and how the Faculty of Education enters any of the contexts on the continent. The parable of the ‘five loaves and two fishes’ gave me inspiration. I hear the voices of my ancestors speaking to my soul, telling me to reach out and serve. I am grateful for the generosity of others which enabled me to take a collective message of care to those villages in Kenya.”

“My compromise is to earn a living in this institution but at the same time bring a critical and ethical perspective to all the Faculty’s endeavours in internationalization and globalization. I see myself as a worker who has to work within a sea of ideas and policies, but I have a moral compass to navigate with.”

Clockwise (starting at 12 o’clock):
Glen Owen, Principal of Mico College with Yvonne, first female student of the year, in front of Jamaica House, 1965 | Yvonne starts a sewing cooperative for widows at Kanyawegi village | Yvonne with HIV-positive orphan in Kenya (photo: John Agak) | Harambee fundraiser for Oyiengo Primary School | Yvonne with author Grace Ogot at Moi University | Mico College Guider Troop, Jamaica, 1964 | Yvonne presenting goats to widows at Kanyawegi village | Moi University in Kenya