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A Daring Choice

Selected as one of America's top young black activists, Charlene Carruthers '07 follows her passion for change.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07



Carruthers at Brooklyn's Borough Hall. In New York City, she works at the Women's Media Center while maintaining her own blog and Twitter pages. (Photo by Todd France)

During her first year at Illinois Wesleyan, Charlene Carruthers '07 thought she wanted to be a doctor. Instead, her college and postgraduation life has led her through a whirlwind of opportunities to inform and help others — not through medicine, but through social and political activism.

Now a special initiatives manager at the Women's Media Center in New York City, Carruthers previously made her mark with nonprofit groups such as the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under Law and the Center for Community Change. Last year, she traveled to Haiti to help raise awareness of the plight of millions left homeless from a devastating earthquake.

In February, she was recognized by the national organization Campus Progress as one of America's 10 Most Daring Young Black Activists. "I was pleasantly surprised and very humbled, especially to be named alongside some really amazing young people who are on that list," she says. "It was definitely an honor."

Carruthers traces her activism to her first year at IWU, when she traveled to South Africa as part of a May Term course taught by William Munro, professor of political science and director of International Studies.

“It was my first time out of the country,” she says. “I was 18 years old and it was an amazing, amazing experience. It was also my first time studying politics.” Carruthers was shocked and fascinated to learn the details of South Africa’s history of racial segregation through its colonial and apartheid eras. “For me, being a person of African descent, coming from Chicago, which is a very racially and economically segregated city, and going to a country where racial segregation was normal for centuries ... for me, it just blew up my little mind. It changed how I thought about the world.”

Born and raised on Chicago’s south side, Carruthers’ neighborhood was populated mostly by Latin American immigrants. “My parents used it as an opportunity to teach us about acceptance of other people and respecting other people regardless of what they look like or what language they speak,” she says. “I was also raised on welfare as a kid ... and some of my most vivid memories growing up are of going to the public-aid office.” Carruthers says the disrespect her family faced there has stayed with her. “It has to do a lot with institutional racism and classism; it has to do with how people exercise their power. That experience has shaped how I view the world.”

At Illinois Wesleyan, Carruthers majored in international studies and history. The decision to enroll at IWU came after she attended a multicultural student weekend. “The people at Wesleyan were just so open and so friendly,” she recalls. As a student, she co-chaired the Intercultural Leadership Alliance, established in 2005 to promote cultural diversity. She was also active in the Black Student Union, Student Senate’s Executive Board and several other organizations.

Professor of History W. Michael Weis met Carruthers during her first semester. “Even then one could see a woman who was confident, charismatic, ambitious and determined to make a difference,” he says.

In her final year, Carruthers took an International Studies senior seminar with Weis. “By that time she was already a campus legend and already a committed activist,” he says. “I could tell that she was going to have a big impact on the world. Charlene has the ability to see the big picture, but the awareness to understand that lives are changed one at a time. ... It is people like her who make this world a better place and IWU a great institution.”

Carruthers went on to earn a master’s degree in social work from Washington University in St. Louis. While there, she traveled to China to study and compare the country’s mental health services with the American system. Upon her return, she became more involved in activism and politics, campaigning against anti-affirmative action state legislation and volunteering for local political races. After graduating, she moved to Washington, D.C., and eventually took an organizing apprenticeship that returned her to her Chicago roots.

“What I learned is how to understand power, how to build power and how to work with people to make changes in communities,” she says. She was surprised to find out that controversial activist

Saul Alinsky, considered the founder of modern community organizing, first began his work in the Back of the Yards neighborhood — the same Chicago neighborhood where Carruthers grew up.

Her focus shifted to Haiti when she first heard about the earthquake that devastated the island nation in January 2010. “I know quite a few Haitians,” she says. “I am not Haitian, but it touched me. I just had a really strong reaction to it; I remember at the time feeling quite powerless. It was always in the back of my mind. I wanted to do more.”

That chance came several months later, after she raised money to travel to Haiti. “I saw things there that I had never seen in my life,” she says. “But I also saw some remarkable work; some amazing resiliency and creativity to do a lot with few resources.” She wants to go back someday. “To me, I feel a very strong connection to the African diaspora, no matter where we are,” she says. “That’s the work that I’m going to always do with my life.”

On her blog at thefreedompages.wordpress.com, Carruthers writes about issues she is working with and communities she’s invested in. Topics range from current protests and women’s health to black history and leadership. Her posts often include direct queries to readers such as: “My question to you is: What MOVES you?”

“I just write with the hope that people get a little bit uncomfortable,” she says, “and they start to think about it, and eventually go out and do something about it.

“That’s the point of my writing — to agitate, inform and hopefully get them to go out and do something.”

Carruthers is also active on Twitter, a social networking site, at [NVrComfortable](https://twitter.com/NVrComfortable). “It’s a great way to amplify the work you do on the ground,” she says of Twitter. “It provides transparency and speed that no other medium can match. I definitely leverage it in my organizing and my personal work.” Her Tweets aren’t all serious, though— Carruthers shares humor-laced thoughts on food, pop culture and style.

Social media is a big part of her work for media advocacy efforts at the Women’s Media Center. Founded in 2005 by Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda and others, the nonprofit center works to ensure that women’s stories are told and their voices



Carruthers, right, met with Congresswoman Barbara Lee at a Congressional Black Caucus Foundation event on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

heard in the national media. “I specially managed the campaign for Gloria Steinem’s documentary premiere, *Gloria: In Her Own Words*, and now manage our campaign around the film *Miss Representation*,” says Carruthers, adding, “I have met Gloria; she’s still very much a feminist icon for my generation.”

This fall, Carruthers will apply to law schools, hoping to eventually work in juvenile justice. “I love working with young people,” she says. “It’s my passion. I especially love working with young people of color; I see myself in a lot of them, especially the young women I work with.” Such justice work would be a perfect match, she says. “Our young people are being thrown away. I think they have great potential to actually be leaders. I want to couple my organizing experience with my leadership, legal and social work.”

But wherever she ends up, Carruthers says she won’t forget her past, especially her Wesleyan education. “This country is in the midst of a bit of an identity crisis; we’re at a major turning point in our history. I think the kind of education that I was given at Wesleyan is the kind of education that set me up to conceptualize how I can be most useful and most effective in this work. Wesleyan made sure we understood we were global citizens. ... Whatever I do in the future, I always take my education and the experiences I had at Wesleyan with me.”