Attachment: Women of Faith Award Information and Award Recipient Biographies

About the Awards

Mother Agatha Ryan, S.B.S. (1932-1955): The Builder Award
2019 Honoree: Christina Francis ’89

Mother Agatha was a pioneer in the teaching of Native Americans. As Directress of Schools for the S.B.S. she was responsible for the establishment of 48 elementary schools and 14 high schools.

Under her faithful leadership at Xavier she oversaw the development of the College of Arts & Sciences, the College of Pharmacy, and the graduate school.

The Mother Agatha Ryan Woman of Faith Award is awarded to a friend, parent, or alumna of Xavier who has demonstrated excellence in her career endeavors and professional pursuits while also activating her faith in service to her community, and who has tirelessly practiced a faith that does justice, ensures equity, and uplifts the human spirit.

Sr. Josephina Kenney, S.B.S. (1955-1965): The Light of Knowledge Award
2019 Honoree: Juanita Baranco

Sr. Josephina came to Xavier University in 1949. She taught education and eventually headed the Department of Education. She was the Supervisor of Elementary Schools for the Archdiocese of New Orleans from 1952-1955. She taught at Corpus Christi in New Orleans and St. Cyprian's in Columbus, OH, and was Principal at St. Elizabeth's in Chicago and Xavier Prep.

The Sr. Josephina Kenney Woman of Faith Award is awarded to a friend, parent, or alumna of Xavier who has demonstrated a commitment to the pursuit of education for “the least of these” through her activism, advocacy, and philanthropic engagement.

2019 Honoree: Gayle Benson

Sr. Maris Stella served as Director of the Division of Education at Xavier from 1959 until 1965, and then again from 1968-1970. She was the last of the religious to lead Xavier in a formal capacity as president. The Sr. Maris Stella Woman of Faith Award is awarded to a friend, parent, or alumna of Xavier who has demonstrated a commitment to utilizing their time, talent, or treasure in service to their faith and to uplift their community. Like St. Katharine and Sr. Maris Stella after her, this woman of faith utilizes her philanthropic support to push her church and society toward social change.
About the Recipients

Christina Francis '89

Christina Francis, a 1989 Xavier graduate and valedictorian, was recently promoted to president of Magic Johnson Enterprises, which serves as a catalyst for community and economic empowerment by making available high-quality entertainment, products and services that answer the demands of ethnically diverse urban communities.

Francis joined the company in 2014 and had been serving as the senior vice president of marketing and communications. In her new role, she is responsible for managing and directing the corporation’s day-to-day operations including strategy, business development, and overseeing many of the organizations prestigious partnerships.

Prior to Magic Johnson Enterprises, Francis was the vice president of marketing & events for NFL Players Inc., where she led the group’s extensive brand and event marketing initiatives, including innovative player promotions, special events, and public relations. Prior to that she served as chief marketing officer for the Orange Bowl Committee. Her notable reputation as a successful business mind was forged on both the client and agency side including strategic marketing roles with Fortune 500 companies such as Walt Disney World, Nissan Motor Corporation, and IBM.

A native of New Orleans, Francis also holds an MBA from the University of New Orleans and was a Fellow for the Consortium in Graduate Study and Management at the University of Texas.

Juanita Baranco

Juanita Powell Baranco is the executive vice president and chief operating officer of The Baran Company LLC, which consists of Mercedes Benz of Buckhead, Mercedes Benz of Covington, Louisiana and smart Center Buckhead.

Following a successful career as an attorney, which included a stint as the assistant attorney general for the state of Georgia, in 1978 she co-founded, along with her husband, Gregory Baranco, the Baranco Automotive. It was one of the first African American owned car dealerships in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The company went on to add several other Mercedes-Benz and Acura dealerships to the fold.

Baranco’s extensive involvement in education has led her to serve as the chairman of the DeKalb County Education Task Force and as a member of the Georgia State Board of Education from 1985 to 1991. She was appointed to the Board of Regents and in 1995 became the first African American women to chair the board. She is the chair of the Board of Trustees of Clark Atlanta University and serves on the Board of The Southern Company. While chair of Georgia’s Board of Regents, she opposed dismantling educational programs that included race and affirmative action.

She was inducted into the Georgia State University Business Hall of Fame.

Her business and community activities have won her numerous awards, among which are recognition by the Dow Jones Company for entrepreneurial excellence, the first Trumpet Award from the Turner Broadcasting System for entrepreneurial excellence, the Entrepreneur of the Year by the Atlanta Business League, the TWCA’s Women of Achievement Award; and the Atlanta History Center’s Defining Women in Atlanta Award.

Baranco has been featured in Essence magazine as one of the best businesswomen in Atlanta and in 2015 was listed as one of Georgia’s 100 Most Influential Women.

A member of the American Bar Association and the State Bar Associations of Georgia and Louisiana, she holds a bachelor’s degree and juris doctorate from LSU.
Gayle Benson provides leadership for the New Orleans Saints and New Orleans Pelicans as owner, succeeding her husband, Tom Benson, who passed away in March 2018. The New Orleans native is an accomplished business professional and philanthropist with strong ties to the local community and who is dedicated to contributing to the growth and enhancement of the Gulf South region.

After marrying in 2004, Mr. and Mrs. Benson worked together to build championship-level NBA and NFL organizations, housed in state-of-the-art facilities at the Ochsner Sports Performance Center, Mercedes-Benz Superdome and Smoothie King Center, while also making a positive impact in the community away from the basketball court and football field.

Community investment and giving back have been hallmarks of the Bensons’ ownership of the Pelicans and Saints, a tradition that continues under Mrs. Benson’s stewardship. Commitment to the health and wellness of the local community have been at the forefront through multiple gifts that established and upgraded the Gayle and Tom Benson Cancer Center on the main campus of Ochsner Medical Center, the area’s leading health service network of hospitals and clinics. In addition to serving on the Ochsner board, Benson has led 100-plus volunteer committee members in hosting the Moonlight and Miracles event the last five years—the organization’s annual gala to benefit the Ochsner Cancer institute. The event has raised over six million dollars since its conception to benefit cancer patients in the region.

Supporting the efforts of former Saints safety Steve Gleason and his Team Gleason organization, which helps provide people with ALS and other debilitating conditions in an environment where they can live vital and productive lives with meaningful freedom and independence, the Benson’s committed five million dollars to the Team Gleason House for Innovative Living at the New Orleans St. Margaret’s facility in 2014.

Mrs. Benson is a committed supporter of the area’s educational institutions on all levels, serving on the boards of several New Orleans high schools, the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, and Tulane University.

A long-time advocate of faith-based causes and spirituality, Benson has been a longtime trusted and valued member of the local Catholic community. She has served on Archbishop’s Community Appeal campaigns for four different Archbishops over the course of the past 30 years. She has worked tirelessly with the Archdiocese of New Orleans’ Catholic Charities organization and its umbrella agencies that feature nearly 50 programs and three affiliated ministries that deliver health and human services to the poor and vulnerable in the eight civil parishes which the Archdiocese serves, as well as food and nutrition services statewide.

She was recipient of the Medal of the Order of St. Louis Award for her dedication to the Church, was named an Honorary Oblate of Mary Immaculate, and received from Pope Benedict XVI the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice award.

Benson began her professional career in 1968 as a manager for noted New York-based costume jeweler Celebrity Jewelry, overseeing and managing the daily operation of over 40 sales associates. She then branched out into real estate development which allowed her to successfully integrate her passion for interior design with property management. In 1975, Mrs. Benson began a 30-year career in the design industry under a business she called Gayle Bird Interiors, a business where she achieved tremendous success.

About Xavier University of Louisiana

Being America’s only historically Black and Catholic University is just the first of the distinctions that have set Xavier University of Louisiana apart for more than eight decades.

Despite its relatively small size (3,300 students), Xavier is a nationally recognized leader in the STEM and the health
sciences, producing more African American students who graduate from medical schools each year than any other university in the United States. Its College of Pharmacy is among the top producers of African American pharmacists.

Its liberal arts based programs in such areas as art, business, education, psychology, and political science – as well as such recent additions as bioinformatics, data science, neuroscience, crime and social justice, and jazz studies – offer students an unbeatable combination of traditional classroom study, hands-on research, service-learning opportunities, and life experiences.

The winning Xavier formula? Provide students with a well-balanced curriculum and an environment that nurtures their intellect and feeds their souls.

At Xavier eXcellence awaits yoU. For more information about Xavier University of Louisiana visit us online at www.xula.edu or follow us on Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter @XULA1925. To book interviews and/or to speak with our experts in the field of pharmacy, education, premed, public health, science, technology, math, business, English, communications and the arts, contact Diana Hernandez at (504) 520-5120 or dhernan1@xula.edu.