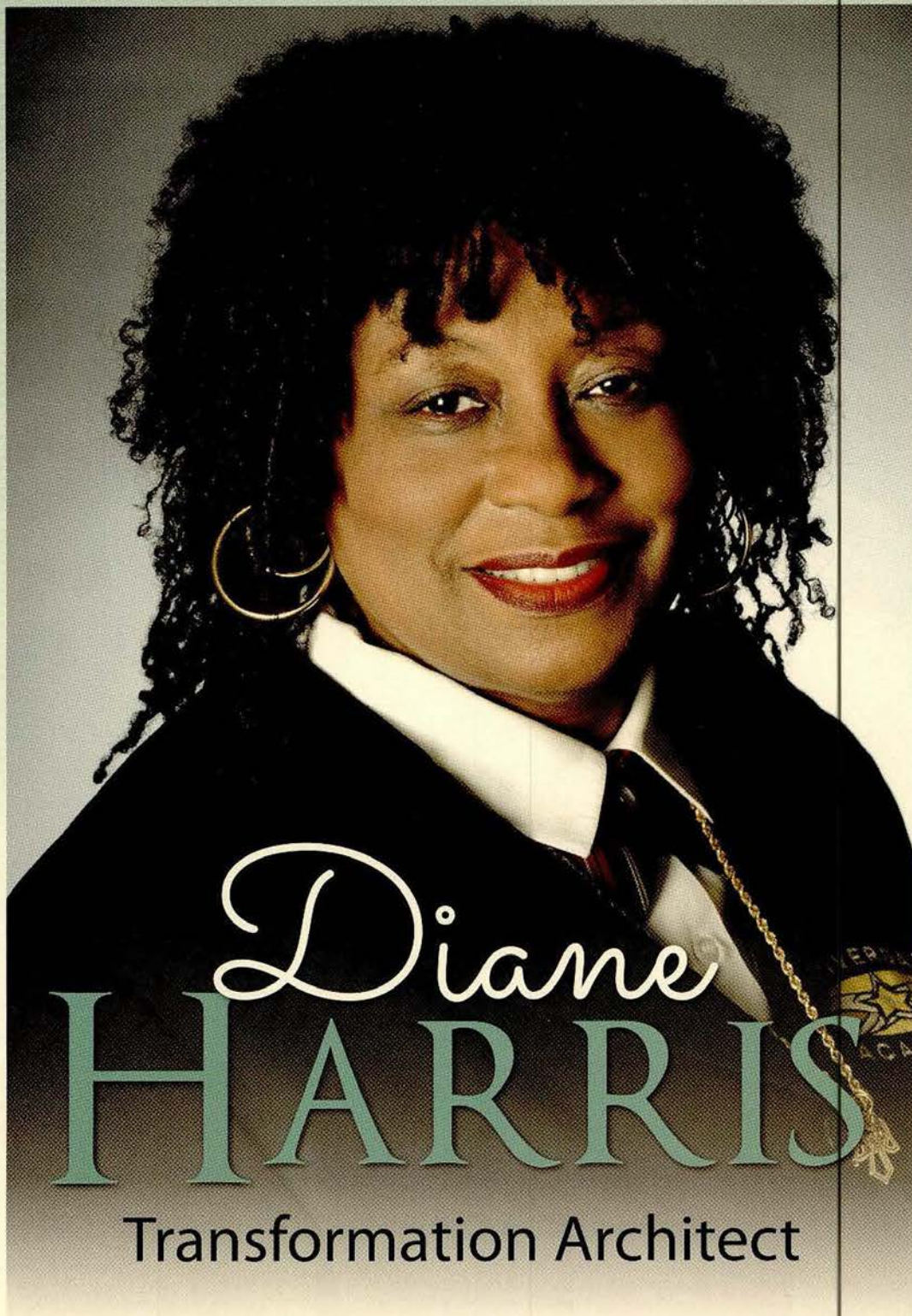


**COMMUNITY UPLIFT**

BY RONALD HALE





## Universal Academy // Rated "A" By Texas Education Agency

Stay in-the-know at [www.universalacademy.com](http://www.universalacademy.com)!

Diane Harris is more than just a visionary. As founder and superintendent of Universal Academy, the innovative powerhouse has catapulted the academy — which has locations in Irving and Coppell, Texas — into one of the most prestigious educational institutes in the country. With its strong academic core, Universal has received a Bronze Award from *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the top high schools in the United States. Harris credits the success of the academy to God, her devoted staff, a passion to surpass mediocrity, and the heartbeat of Universal, its students.

"The youth are our future," Harris proclaims. "As an educator, it is my responsibility to be the voice for the voiceless. It's my life goal to teach and educate those who have been misplaced by society."

Universal's diverse student body has over 2,000 students from nine cultures, backgrounds and nationalities in pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Since its inception in 1998, Universal Academy, formerly known as LTTS Charter Schools Inc., has changed immensely over the years. But it remains steadfast in its commitment to inspire today's youth to reach their highest potential. They are unceasingly diligent in their efforts, making daily deposits into the knowledge bank of each student. These beneficiaries are inspired to accelerate their learning and to develop a life filled with purpose and fulfillment.

Born in Murray, Kentucky, but raised in Chicago, Harris always aspired to teach. From adolescence to adulthood, she carefully assessed different teaching techniques to determine which methods were working, the areas that could be improved, and those ineffective areas that one could do without. In lieu of following the status quo, Harris wanted nothing more than to change the way teaching was done. Inspired by her third-grade teacher, Ms. Marshall, she wanted to make a difference in students' lives, the same way Ms. Marshall made a difference in hers.

"She turned my life around

because she believed in me," Harris says endearingly. "She saw my potential and helped me build confidence in my ability to read, learn and grow. With her guidance, I knew that I could achieve anything. As Ralph Waldo Emerson eloquently puts, *'The task ahead of us is never greater than the power behind us.'* With everything that she deposited into me, I felt that it was necessary to reinvest in others."

Since then, Harris has been sprinting tirelessly towards her ultimate goal — creating a high-performing educational and philosophical atmosphere that is inclusive rather than exclusive, and a place where striving for excellence and quality is a mandate every day.

"My goal is to make Universal Academy one of the top educational institutes in the country," Harris affirms.

While cultural diversity is somewhat elusive in many educational systems in the U.S., Universal Academy has gone above

and beyond, opening its doors to every race, class and gender without prejudice. Harris, a hard-working, no-nonsense educator, has taught on all levels and dealt with the good, the bad, the ugly and indifferent.

On the very first day of her teaching career, she said was challenged by a hard-nosed student.

"A young man walked into my room and said, 'What would you do if I kicked your [explicit]?' she chuckles as she shares this moment. "I told him, 'I will give you your first science lesson. Self-preservation is the first rule of nature, and I will defend myself with every splinter in this wooden chair.'"

The student quickly learned that there was no intimidating his new teacher, but this disheartening ordeal left Harris, the would-be game changer, in tears for weeks. Shortly after this encounter, and after numerous chats with her brother, who is also an educator in Jamaica, Harris instituted the Martial Law program. The student discipline program proved to be useful. Within two weeks her students were under control.

"They were eager to learn, well-behaved and doing remarkable things that I wouldn't have believed if I had not observed it myself. My class was the only class in the school that walked out in straight lines every day. Their grades improved tremendously," Harris says proudly. The following year, she was promoted to teach the top fifth-grade class in the school. At that moment, she realized the anointing power she had as a teacher who can make a difference.

Later, Harris was given the opportunity to teach, grow and lead kids with autism. She identified and nurtured each student's gift. She took a group of low-performing sixth-graders and made them believe that they were more than castaways. With love, patience, determination and hard work, the children excelled beyond measure.

By the end of their eighth-grade year, they were performing at a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade level and above in any subject





## COMMUNITY UPLIFT

BY RONALD HALE

area. During this time, Harris says, the parents were never present. This didn't discourage her, but rather it motivated her to push.

"I believe all kids can perform at exceedingly high levels, but we hold them back because we teach to the level of the capacity we perceive. Times have changed, and as teachers we need to change with the time. With the evolution of education, our teachers need to be re-trained in order to meet the demands of today," Harris says adamantly.

Universal provides a strong academic core in English Language Arts; Mathematics; Science and Technology; Social Studies; Languages Other Than English; Physical Education; Health; and the Arts. It has also excelled in sports by producing state champion hurdlers, a TCSAA girls state championship basketball team, UIL boys district championship basketball team, UIL boys regional champions, UIL girls district championship basketball team, national fencing champions, UIL boys and girls district championship track and district football champions.

Well-known for its award-winning programs, Universal Academy successfully uses a problem-based learning approach and individualized instructional method, which is one of few such models in the state. Universal Academy offers students and families a wide range of educational options, including Visual and Performing Arts, English as a Second Language, Gifted Programs, and Special Education Programs.

Harris has represented Universal Academy at Harvard University conferences five times, which included five days of intense re-education. At the conference there was sharing of ideas and data of the newest and best techniques to reach all learners.

"I have implemented this training at Universal, and as they say, 'The proof is in the pudding,'" she says.

At Universal, there is a 100% graduation rate, with the majority of students going off to further their education.

Universal Academy is well on its way to becoming one of the top educational institutions in the country. Harris says she is humbled that God handpicked her to lead Universal. She is a humorous, industrious, dedicated, hardworking and persistent leader with a no-excuse policy.

"I am called to be an advocate for children! I am here to empower the youth because they are our future. My passion and purpose is to make sure every child that attends Universal gets the best education possible. We cannot label a child and put them aside. On my watch, no child will be left behind," she said.

Harris cares deeply for the youth, giving 110% to educate children who attend Universal, and she consistently stands for what's right for the children. She is a pioneer who has only grazed the educational surface.

"Well done my good and faithful servant."

For more information about Universal Academy, go to [universalacademy.com](http://universalacademy.com).

