

4-1-2020

The World Opened Up

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Recommended Citation

Chourey, Sarita (2020) "The World Opened Up," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 63 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol63/iss1/18>

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It was 2016, and LaDavia Drummond Just '02 was deeply moved by the words of the Rev. Canon Dr. John Senyonyi, a preacher from Uganda who was visiting St. Andrew's Church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. After the service, Just approached him – a mathematician and vice chancellor of Uganda Christian University – with a bold promise.

“PLEASE REMEMBER MY FACE,” SHE URGED SENYONYI. “BECAUSE YOU WILL SEE ME AGAIN IN UGANDA.”

Seven months later, Just would make good on the promise.

After a mission trip to the East African nation in 2016, Just said yes to a request for help from Dr. Edward Kanyesigye, at the time the dean of health sciences, which led to her move in April of 2019 to Kampala as a Fulbright scholar to teach pharmacology to medical and dental students at the Uganda Christian University School of Medicine.

“I’m on my feet for three and four hours in an African classroom with no AC and 60 students packed in, so we’re not talking about conditions that (Americans are) used to. But I love it,” Just says. “(My students) are so curious about me, and they want to know my story. I say, ‘You guys, you don’t understand – it wasn’t my passion to teach that brought me to Uganda. But I will tell you that being here with you has sparked a passion in me to teach,’ and it’s the truth.”

While Just’s life is in Uganda today, her story began in Greenville, South Carolina. But she doesn’t credit herself as the central driver of her success.

“It’s too miraculous to be about my hard work and my grit alone,” she says. “It is about God – for His glory and His kingdom.

What’s amazing is that it didn’t even matter that I didn’t know God yet. He knew me.”

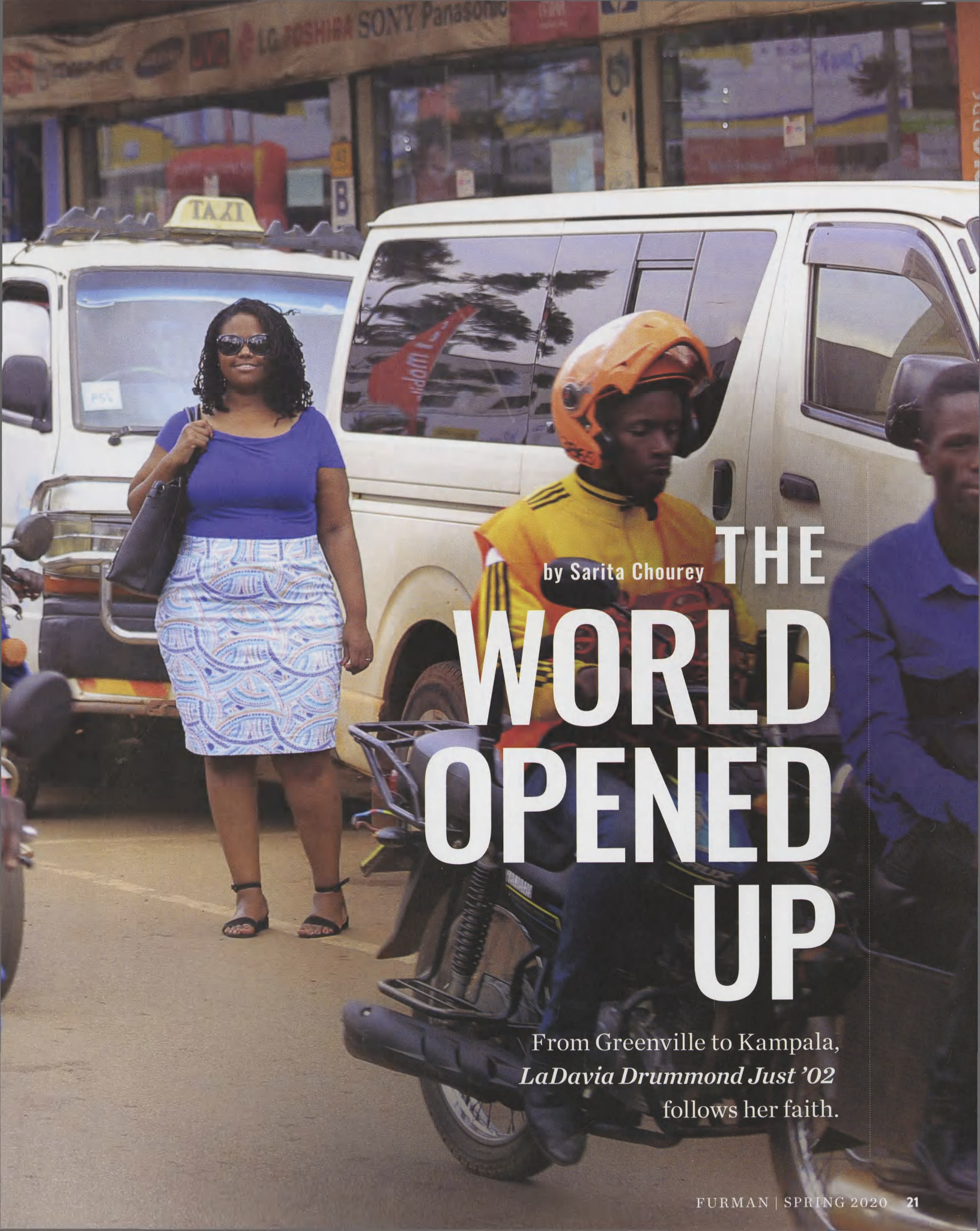
EARLY YEARS

Her early years were rooted in premature responsibility and devoid of most childhood freedoms and innocent joys.

“My life was all about my mother’s life. My life wasn’t my own,” Just says. “My upbringing had nothing to do with me.”

Just and her younger sister grew up with a single mother whose struggles with lupus dominated almost every facet of their lives. At one point, caring for her became so difficult that Just was forced to drop out of high school. Planning for the future meant getting through the day.

“I was just hopeless. The only thing that I had to look forward to were my daydreams, my imagination,” Just remembers. “There was nothing in my active life that suggested it would be any better or any more than I was currently dealing with. ... For a long time growing up, college wasn’t a real thing to me. It wasn’t possible, and it wasn’t something I expected to do.”



by Sarita Chourey

THE WORLD OPENED UP

From Greenville to Kampala,
LaDavia Drummond Just '02
follows her faith.

But then something unexpected happened. Her high school physics teacher, Tommy Edwards, suggested she apply to Furman.

“I didn’t know anything about Furman, so I didn’t even know to take it as a compliment that he thought I was good enough. All I thought was, ‘Since you say I’m good enough, I’ll apply,’” she recalls.

She was accepted and began to flourish, despite arriving on campus homeless and feeling, as she recalls, like “an orphan in spirit.” Just was allowed to live in the residence halls even when the university was closed, and the university accommodated her need to bring her nephew, who was a baby, to class so her sister could continue attending high school.

“That was my first encounter with LaDavia,” Professor of Chemistry John Wheeler says. “She was in my introductory chemistry course, and as we got to know one another I came to realize she was coming from work in the mornings. And there were times when LaDavia came in with a very young infant and would sit in the back row taking notes in what most students would suggest is a very rigorous introductory course. I was concerned for her. I was concerned for her health in that she was taking on a tremendous load.”

That remains Wheeler’s first and only experience teaching with a baby in attendance. He became Just’s adviser and watched as she gained confidence, ultimately earning the Carolyn Darby Vogel Chemistry Scholarship and completing a chemistry degree. Graduation presented her with real opportunities for the first time.

“IT’S TOO MIRACULOUS TO BE ABOUT MY HARD WORK AND MY GRIT ALONE.”



A LIFE UNFOLDS

Just followed her Doctor of Pharmacy from the Medical University of South Carolina with a pair of master’s degrees earned concurrently – in business administration from The Citadel and health administration from the MUSC – while working full time as a clinical pharmacist. On paper, that suggests tremendous drive, but Just attributes her accomplishments to her faith in God.

“I don’t even consider degrees. I just take things as they come,” she says. “I wasn’t super ambitious, believe it or not.”

Just met her husband, Jason, in 2002, and they have three daughters: Jada, who is in ninth grade, and twins Jamie and Jael. “Work travels have kept me away from home quite a bit for the last couple



Opposite: Just in a classroom at the Uganda Christian University School of Medicine and next to Furman President Elizabeth Davis during opening Convocation in 2019, where Just was a speaker.

Family photo (from left): Jael, Jason, Jada, LaDavia and Jamie Just.

of years,” she says. “I’m grateful to Jason for his support and understanding.”

But because Jason couldn’t leave his career in South Carolina, it has just been Just and her girls several time zones away. When Just traveled to Furman in August to deliver the 2019 Convocation speech, Jason flew from South Carolina to Kampala to stay with the children.

Just says the experience of living in Uganda has deepened the family’s bond.

“I needed to reconnect with these girls. ... I believe this bond that’s happening right now could only happen under these exact circumstances,” she says. “I am stronger than I thought I was. I am more capable as a mother than I thought I was. And these kids are happy.”

One of the memories they’ll bring back is of meeting the United States ambassador to Uganda, who is also a Furman alumna: **Deborah Malac ’77**.

“We made that meeting happen, and it was great,” Just says. “She inspired me. Just coming out of my situation that I was in, growing up and making it to Furman – that should have been enough to tell me that anything is possible. But being here has opened the world up to me.”

When Just completes her term in Uganda, she knows one thing for certain – she’ll remain open to whatever opportunities arise.

“I can see that one day I will make a difference, whether locally or globally, I don’t know which,” she says. “But I know God will use me to make a difference.” ♦