Synthia Saint James Visit at the CHC
Commonwealth Honors College hosted world renowned artist and author, Synthia Saint James, on February 6, who led an art collage workshop for students and faculty in the College’s Events Hall.

Dr. Saint James has written 27 books including children’s books, poetry collections, and her autobiographical *Living My Dreams: An Artistic Approach to Marketing*. She has produced internationally recognized artwork, which has received numerous prestigious awards, and is showcased in museums and foreign embassies. She has been commissioned to design awards that were presented to Nelson Mandela and Maya Angelou. Dr. Saint James is further known for her creation of the first national Kwanzaa postage stamp, and her illustration of the cover of the groundbreaking novel *Waiting to Exhale* by Terry McMillan. Her vibrant persona and work with numerous charities are striking to those who meet her.

Dr. Saint James is well known for her creation of the first national Kwanzaa stamp. When asked about the significance of Kwanzaa in her life, she said she remembers the people and attitude that surround the holiday more than the holiday itself.

“What I love about Kwanzaa are the principles. The principles pertain to anyone. The children’s song we wrote called “Happy Happy Kwanzaa” is for everyone. It’s a multicultural group of children and it’s a multicultural group of children that sing the background.” Dr. Saint James said: “My favorite principle is self determination. That’s what Kwanzaa means to me.”

Dr. Saint James spoke in a similar manner about the social message of her work, which she said was unity: “unity and acceptance--cultural acceptance.” Her work stems from her own cultural heritage of African American, Haitian, Native American, and German Jew backgrounds.

A recurring theme throughout the conversation was the difficulty that accompanies a career as an artist. “I’m a child from the 60s, and what little black girl, or young woman of color, is gonna be able to do anything as an artist?”

As a self-taught artist, she worked hard, across many different disciplines, to get to where she is now. When asked if this multidisciplinary experience influenced her success as an artist, she responded “definitely.” Her first job working for a mortgage insurance company, and the next a payroll clerk, taught her accounting, which helped her know how to handle money. The next job she took working for a record company taught her about promotion and publicity. “I was always looking for something to enable me to keep doing what I’m doing, and that’s still the way I make it work.”

“In 2010 I got my honorary doctorate, so I’m a self taught artist who they can call doctor. But I earned it by life and by giving. I feel like it’s the creative gift, which is a responsibility--which I love sharing so it’s not a problem. But it’s constantly about reinventing so that you can keep doing whatever you want to do, what your real heart is.”

She had advice for college students--“listen to their inner heart.”

“Listen to their inner heart. Just listen to that and follow that as best as you can. You know, take care of the stuff that you have to take care of, but really don’t leave that behind. Cuz so many people spend their whole lives doing something that they don’t ever wanna do, and they just are miserable. I see people like that all the time. And a couple of them are like friends of mine. They’re just waiting for the time off, and they hardly ever smile because they are so frustrated and angry. But if there’s a way that you can integrate your joy and your passion in your life that’s to me the most important part. Even if you may have to do some things that you don’t wanna do. Sometimes but maybe not all the time. But don’t forget to listen. For college students as well as people period there’s so many paths and everyone’s showing something at you from different ways. And you’re tryna please that one and that one and you get tired of hearing the same thing from this one but you know you try to deal with it so it kinda clouds so you just have to find that quiet space and listen.”

Echoing this advice, she elaborated on one of her beliefs regarding art education--that art should not be graded. One reason for this, she said, is that she’s had friends who were art majors and minors, and not one of them paints to this day “because it became a grade.” She said that often teachers give students too much guidance, and don’t let the students flow. She said that she thinks that if the grade is removed, that “will allow a person to be because this person is not judging you, that person isn’t going to say whether it is a C or an A. It’s what’s coming out of you, as long as you complete the assignment, and you can tell when someone is sincere about what they’re doing.”
The workshop Dr. Saint James conducted was directed with the same philosophy. Everyone in attendance created collages using material provided, and designed by their own volition.

"What makes the university and honors college a great place, is being able to have experiences with amazing people like Synthia Saint James," said Assistant to the Dean, Jennifer Bennett.

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