‘They Belong to Me’
Judge Glenda Hatchett returns to say goodbye to the Class of 2005
he arrived with cameras and words. Judge Glenda Hatchett, the Atlanta sage made famous from her syndicated eponymous show, returned once more to Morehouse College. She came four years ago, when the graduates were still freshmen, mere babes, to welcome them. This time she came to bless their futures and help them say goodbye to Morehouse.

Throughout their time at the College, she has returned again and again, always encouraging them, always challenging them and always hoping that she would one day see them on Century Campus, in caps and gowns, degrees in hand ready to shake the world in its boots.

When Hatchett stood to give her speech, she brought no notes, she says, only a bond with the class she calls her own.

“People asked me to send them the [longer version] of the speech, but what they don’t understand is that this speech is really etched on my heart.”

But Hatchett couldn’t let her last visit with the Class of 2005 pass without bringing some guests of her own: her show. Namely, she brought 15-year-old Gene Wooten and his parents, Isaac and Carmen Rhone, from Detroit to witness a group of African American men enter the real world with a college degree, something Wooten never dreamed he could do.

“What has changed most dramatically is that he has a sense of hope, he now has a vision and a belief that he can go to college,” says Hatchett. “All of the Morehouse Men are given a brick their freshman year and a young man gave [Gene] his brick. Gene gave the brick back and said, ‘No, I have to earn my own brick,’ which I thought was…symbolic of that important first step.”

Jabez Shakur, a junior marketing major from Little Rock, Ark., agrees. “(Wooten) has some understanding now of the end. He saw the finished Morehouse product. Now his thinking is more global, he can see beyond his block and his neighborhood.”

Prior to Wooten’s arrival on campus, Shakur was given 18 pages to read on Wooten before he would show him around the Morehouse campus. From the dossier, he gathered that Wooten was “very curious with an unquenchable desire to get things done.” Others didn’t agree with this assessment. Their interpretation rendered Wooten a delinquent and troublemaker. Shakur interpreted that he was “smart” and had an “entrepreneurship spirit.”

For instance, when Wooten swiped 200 DVDS from his mother and sold them at $2 a pop, it showed business acumen, Shakur insists. “He understood that he had to sell them at a price that would generate interest and would move them quickly.”

Eleven pit bull puppies, which were valued upwards of $3,000 apiece, was one of Wooten’s more ambitious endeavors. However, the consequences of this particularly dangerous heist came knocking at his front door. Literally.

There banging on the door one day was the puppies’ owner, a reputed drug dealer. According to Shakur, the dealer told Carmen Rhone, Wooten’s mother, that her son would have been a dead man had he not personally known her.

Frightened and desperate, Rhone called for reinforcement on her own son. She called Judge Hatchett because of her reputation for being tough, but fair, and for doling out unconventional sentences, not with the purpose of punishing, but of transforming.

When Shakur met Wooten on Friday night, he was sure that Wooten thought of him as a goody-too-shoe. “He didn’t feel like I would relate to him and his situation. But after we began talking, he could tell I was from the streets.” Within 20 minutes, Wooten was calling him “brother” and a bond began to develop.

Their conversations became deeper and more meaningful. By noon on Saturday, Wooten confided in Shakur that he was dealing with the rejection of being adopted. By that afternoon, the two of them broke into spontaneous rapping, revealing their creative sides. And by dusk, it was Shakur’s turn to open up. He was not the straight-laced, typical college student Wooten had mistook him to be.

For Shakur, trouble started at age 12. Middle school and most of high school was spent in a pot-smoking, alcohol-imbibing haze. At 16, he was shot in the stomach and left for dead.

So what was Shakur doing acting as Wooten’s tour guide? He was tapped not so much to guide Wooten around the campus as to...
help guide him from his destructive path—one in which Shakur was well aware of the bumps and potholes and detours.

After the shooting—from outward appearances—life didn’t change much for Shakur. He didn’t give up the drugs or booze. And school was still a big joke.

But inside, something was stirring. He didn’t take life for granted anymore. He became more aware of his surroundings. And one day, he simply “got sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Nearly a year after the shooting, his mother took him to a leadership conference, and he heard a speaker that made him snap to attention.

“He told me where I was and where I would end up. I stopped drinking that day.”

It took another year before he kicked his marijuana habit. And he had to cut loose a lot of friends.

“None of it was easy.

“That’s something I had to tell Eugene…that it won’t be easy. You feel like the alcohol and the weed brought you a lot of peace and security.”

When Shakur told his high school counselor that he wanted to graduate with his class, she laughed out loud. When she saw his earnest expression, she asked incredulously: “Are you serious? There is no way you’ll graduate on time,” Shakur recalled.

But he doubled his course load, taking two math and history classes in one semester and enrolling in night school to complete the science requirement. He also managed to run track And he bore the humiliation of going to classes with freshmen. He not only graduated with his class, but was accepted to Paul Quinn College, albeit a few years after his high school graduation.

Two years after attending Paul Quinn, Shakur decided he needed more of a challenge and applied to Morehouse. When he was accepted, his mother wept. “My mom is extremely proud today. Turning your life around brings healing to a mother.”

Today, besides being a full-time student, Shakur is a published poet, a recording artist and a real-estate investor. “I can’t say it’s my own doing. I give all the credit to God.

“It is an honor to be given the responsibility, of saying something and having someone hungry for your wisdom. It’s an honor and a huge responsibility, so I don’t take my position lightly. I have paid the price, so I can count the cost.”

He remembers counting the cost on that fateful night of his shooting. Slumping to the floor, his first thought was that this wasn’t like the movies. “This is how people really die.”

Then, images flashed through his head. “One by one, I saw all of these people who I felt had been sent to me to help me find my way. My grandfather, some of my teachers, the elders in my community.”

As Shakur continues to mentor Wooten, he has experienced a reversal of fortune. After conquering his addictions and coming from the brink of academic disaster, he believes that he now has been sent to help Wooten find his way.

“I never would have thought I would be a role model—that someone would look to me to help shape their life and turn their life around.”

After the Morehouse commencement, while at Davidson House, the president’s residence, wrapping up the shoot, Hatchett talked to the guests about why she brought him to the embrace of the only historically black college for black males in the world—instead of the harsh walls of a jail.

“I just had to go with my instincts on this one,” she says. “I’ve been doing this for such a long time that it really is in your gut—what you believe might be the key to getting him to move to a different place in his life.”
While Wooten began to think about his future as he watched the ceremony, at least one of the 382 graduates in the Class of 2005 was thinking about his past.

As Gregory Jackson Jr. ’05, who graduated with a degree in marketing and a minor in Leadership Studies, sat under rain drops and gazed at the sea of colorful umbrellas raised by his fellow graduates and their friends and families, he began to examine the last four years he spent at Morehouse College.

“Graduation was a bittersweet moment,” reminisces Jackson. “Whatever problem I had with someone, it was gone because right now it was about caring, it was about that Morehouse mystique. All that…we’ve been learning we have to apply it now.”

Beset by rain, thunder and lightening, suffice to say that this Commencement was short. And though the rain fell from early morning to the moment the ceremony ended, as parents clutched their children tight under ponchos and newspapers and grandparents held each other under wide umbrellas, this was still a special day—one made memorable by Hatchett’s words.

“I said that they belong to me, that I was claiming them and I was expecting great things from them,” says Hatchett, who begins to speak as if she were there at the podium on that cloudy day. “I told you your freshman year that I have come to claim you and I come this morning to reclaim you because I see you as such possibilities of hope—not only for the community, but for the nation and for the world. I was so disappointed that I didn’t get the chance to do my commencement speech ‘cause I had some more stuff I needed to tell them.”

Hatchett is the thread woven through the fabric of Jackson’s experience at Morehouse.

He remembers her coming to speak at New Student Orientation and a return visit for a King Day Convocation. And she always walked the talk, Jackson says. Her bringing young Wooten to Commencement is a testament to that.

“She wasn’t just a talker,” says Jackson. “She went out and served and helped young men. She actually brought her show, flying a young man and his family here and allowing them to see [our] rituals. There’s something sacred about them and they’re life-changing.”

As Hatchett gathered herself to participate in one last ritual for the Class of 2005, the final rite of passage for these young men, and the rain poured, somehow her three-and-a-half minutes didn’t seem so short. Over the course of 48 months or 1,460 days or 2,102,400 minutes, Hatchett had been preparing for this very wet moment. Even with only a slip of a moment to speak, she had four years worth of words behind her.

From Father to Son

By mone't cooper

ON THE SIMMERING MORNING of July 23, Morehouse College ended its third summer commencement exercises in King Chapel.

As 56 new Morehouse Men ambled into Archer Hall to pick up their degrees, some parents, including Odell McGowan followed suit. He had traveled from St. Louis to witness his son, Jason, take his first steps into the “real world.”

“I feel like I did the four years with him,” Jason’s father sighed, standing in the cool of the Archer Hall hallway, wiping his brow and juggling two cameras and the commencement program.

The younger McGowan, who graduated with a biology degree, will enter graduate school at St. Louis University to pursue a master’s in science and anatomy. After graduation, he plans to enter medical school to become a cardiologist—a career he set his sights on since age 12. But it is his dad’s words, and pocket-book, he credits with giving him the staying power to finish.

“Dad drove me down every year,” said McGowan. “He was there the first day. Anytime I had an issue, he helped me through it, and he’s here today.”

His father listens intently. At age of 66, he calls himself a “late starter,” but a man who takes his job as a father seriously. The former McDonald’s franchisee employed his son at his restaurants, often assigning him to tasks of hard labor.

“I [wanted] to show him that’s not what you want to do,” he said.

The father and son’s story could well have been a page from the speech of commencement speaker Herman Cain ’67, Morehouse trustee and CEO of T.H.E. New Voice Inc. and the New Voters Alliance. Cain spoke of the example his own hardworking father set for him and his brother.

Indeed, the lessons Cain’s father taught him particularly resonated with the younger McGowan: “have dreams—but more than one” and “the road to success is not a straight one.”

McGowan admits that the road to finishing his Morehouse journey was filled with sharp curves and unexpected turns. But his father’s wisdom saw him through, especially when May arrived and McGowan realized he would not graduate due to a one-hour lab requirement left unfulfilled. But he came to Morehouse with a dream of graduating in 2005, and Summer Commencement has allowed him to come full circle—finishing in the place where he began some “four years and two months” earlier.

“At first I wasn’t so excited about Summer Commencement,” McGowan admits, his eyes taking in the scene of graduates with their families. “But I started (on Westview) Street singing ‘Dear Old Morehouse’ and I finished on the same street in a cap and gown.”