



Dr. Janice Hilliard (left) working with the UH women's basketball team.

UH WHERE ARE THEY *now*

Dr. Janice Hilliard's JOURNEY TO SUCCESS – And Giving Back

By Roman Petrowski

Sometimes in life it may feel as though you are on a predetermined path. Some call it fate, others destiny, maybe even luck. Whatever the term, it feels like everything is lined up and all you have to do is follow your path to be successful.

For others, like Houston alum Dr. Janice Hilliard, you have to make your own path. You have to fight for everything you've ever had and every opportunity you're given is earned. Sure, there are people who help along the way, but through your own hard work and determination, you build your own path to success throughout life. But no one succeeds in life by themselves. It also takes support from others, confidence and commitment.

In the mid-1960s, the small town of McGregor, Texas, located just southwest of Waco, had a population of fewer than 5,000 residents – residents who had remained segregated until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 brought

about a whole new world of possibilities for African Americans not only there, but throughout the United States.

In 1965 Hilliard, a first grader at the time, made history in McGregor, when she became one of three students to integrate the public schools. A brave seven-year old, entering what would be a graduating class of just 81, Hilliard never looked back from that moment and became one of the most popular students in her class, and also one of the most gifted basketball players in her town and in the state of Texas.

During her senior year in high school, Hilliard visited her guidance counselor at McGregor High School. Hilliard had dreams of going to college, earning a women's basketball scholarship, and beginning the next step in a successful career. However, the counselor and Hilliard did not see eye-to-eye.

"My senior year, I went in to see my counselor for the very

first time, and I said I'm going to college and I'm going to get a basketball scholarship," Hilliard recalls. "I had no idea what the SAT or the ACT was. I was a 'B' student but I had no clue what it took to get a college scholarship. She looked at me and said you're not going to college. You haven't taken enough math classes or any foreign language classes. That was the beginning of my motivation to succeed."

Female student-athletes were not recruited to play college sports during Hilliard's time. She and her brothers drove across the state, from Dallas to Austin and everywhere in between, trying out for various basketball programs. Her travels throughout the Lone Star State eventually led her to meet University of Houston Head Coach Dot Woodfin, who gave her a full scholarship.

"I met the best person in Coach Woodfin here," Hilliard says. "She's still my role model and mentor today. She was the person

that brought us to the big city of Houston, made us feel comfortable, created a family environment, acclimated us to the campus and the athletics department and supported us as young women growing into adulthood. We were safe with her. She made the difference for me and for most of us in terms of our experience here."

Hilliard graduated with a degree in education in 1981. She would later earn a Master's Degree in Urban Counseling and a Doctorate in K-12 Educational Administration from Michigan State University. She spent seven years in secondary education teaching, coaching and as a school counselor in Texas and Michigan and eight years in higher education athletics administration as Associate Director of Athletics for Academic Services at the Universities of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Houston.

Hilliard played an integral role in the creation of the UH Academic Center for Excellence located in the Athletics/Alumni Center. Under her leadership, academic support and career services for all Cougar athletes and the overall graduation rate increased significantly.

In 2001, Hilliard accepted an offer from then-NBA Commissioner David Stern to work at the National Basketball Association. "David hired me from North Carolina to come to the NBA and develop the continuing education

and life skills model program for the Development League, Hilliard says. “I managed the programming for players on six teams throughout the Southeast. It was exciting to have such a great opportunity to carry my passion and love for helping athletes from the collegiate to the professional level.”

In 15 seasons with the NBA and the Development League, Hilliard worked with nearly two-thirds of the NBA teams. In her role as Vice President of Player Development, she was responsible for building relationships with players and their families, developing educational, career and transition programming to promote players’ growth on and off the court and team and league staff professional development initiatives.

It was during her travel with the San Antonio Spurs in Germany that Hilliard received a call from Houston Women’s Basketball Head Coach Ronald Hughey to invite her to speak to the women’s basketball team prior to the 2014 season. “The first time I had an opportunity to speak to the

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women was when Coach Hughey brought me back in 2014, Hilliard says. I was in Germany with the Spurs, and he invited me to come that weekend. I came back early because I didn’t want to miss that opportunity. It was an awesome experience and I was so grateful to Coach Hughey.”

Hilliard wanted to share her life’s journey and motivate the team to set high goals and go after them as she had. She wanted them to know how special their time was at UH and the importance of taking advantage of such an outstanding university and athletic program. She wanted them to know that they were capable of achieving the same success she did.

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I do and love, but also in other leadership and decision-making positions. It’s a great time in sports for women to really succeed. I try to be a living example of what they can be.”

From there, the idea came to Hilliard -- an idea to give back not only to the University of Houston and to the game of basketball, but to help student-athletes just like her reach high levels of success. That idea evolved into her creating Hilliard Creative Education & Development Solutions, LLC – an educational consulting firm that works with collegiate, professional and high school athletes to help them achieve success in school, sports and life.

Hilliard was excited and appreciative to coach Hughey for the opportunity to work with the women’s team this past summer.

“The program we started this summer with the ladies is a life skills program,” she explains. “The ultimate goal is to help them maximize their athletic opportunity and to be successful after their sport participation ends.

“The first session we had was on athlete identity,” Hilliard says. “It’s a topic not often talked about in sports. Basically, it has to do with understanding that participating in a sport is what you do but it’s now who you are. We talked about what that means in terms of identity development.”

In the team’s second session, Hilliard taught the Cougars about how to establish their image and promote themselves in a professional manner. With the onslaught of social media for young adults today, athletes are under the microscope more than ever, and

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Janice Hilliard as a Cougar
(back row, third from right)

conducting themselves professionally will help to establish a positive image now and later in life.

“We talked about how, as athletes, it’s important to establish your personal brand, but that your brand is also a part of the university’s brand and that the two must work hand in hand for the benefit of both. You have a great platform and an opportunity to cultivate fans, but you want to do that in a positive light, where it’s a positive thing for you, your team, the athletic department and the university.”

Finally, Hilliard and the Cougars discussed the importance of relationship management. Data from the NCAA shows that over half of collegiate student-athletes feel stressed at some point in their careers. Hilliard knows that today’s student-athletes face an immense amount of pressure that was not around during her playing days. She wants the players to understand how to recognize, manage and seek help to positively handle stress.

“Student-athletes feel under pressure and stressed,” she says.

“Not only from being an athlete, but just from life. There are so many things that are going on. We wanted to talk about where some of that stress and pressure come from and how they can identify and address it.”

Hilliard is aware that times are different now than when she was playing for the Cougars. With classes, meetings and practices, time is a precious resource for student-athletes today. She keeps sessions short and to the point, and is proud when she sees her message resonate with student-athletes. Feedback from the team reflected that they really enjoyed the sessions and felt they would be able to apply the information in their lives today.

“Janice coming in was important to see things from her standpoint and see how things have been built and how things have progressed,” senior guard Chyanne Butler says. “It’s really heart-warming and shocking at the same time. We love hearing her story and learning things from her. We’re grateful for her coming in and being able to learn from her.”

The fall of 2017 marks the 40th anniversary of Hilliard com-

ing to the University of Houston to play for Coach Dot Woodfin. She is impressed with and proud of how much the university and athletics department has grown since she was Associate Athletics Director. She is thankful to be welcomed back and have the opportunity to share her knowledge and experience with fellow UH student-athletes.

The ultimate message, Hilliard says, is that anybody can be successful if you work hard, commit yourself and take advantage of your opportunities.

“The biggest thing I want student-athletes to know is that they have a voice and that they can learn to develop and use it in a positive way. Doing so will maximize their educational and athletic experience and prepare them for successful lives after basketball. Also, that student-athletes have transferrable skills—whether they be communication, time management, leadership or decision-making—that they apply to their life outside of sports. That’s what I really want them to get, appreciate and utilize these skills to enhance their opportunities for success on and off the court.” **CT**



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