

AN  
HOUR  
WITH...

## Irvin D. Reid

PRESIDENT EMERITUS, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY  
BY ALEANNA SIACON // ILLUSTRATION BY JON STICH

### WITH ACCOMPLISHMENTS THAT STRETCH FROM MIDTOWN

to Mozambique, it's hard to distill Irvin D. Reid's career into a single job title. In addition to serving as Wayne State University's first black president from 1997-2008, he's worked as the school's Eugene Applebaum Chair in Community Engagement, facilitated the growth of TechTown, co-created CitizenDetroit, and served as the director for the Forum on Contemporary Issues in Society (FOCIS) and the African Democracy Project. The latter role has taken Reid, along with Wayne State students, to several African nations, where he has discussed policy with presidents and other political leaders, providing Reid with a suitable, singular title: a president among presidents.

**HOURLY DETROIT** As president of Wayne State University what legacy did you hope to leave?

**IRVIN D. REID** When I came to Wayne State University, there were so many opportunities. It was like a *tabula rasa* in one sense. When I looked around, no one really stayed here on weekends. I wanted to build a sense of community. So one of the first initiatives I did here was to build residence halls. Out of those residence halls grew a community. That community grew a whole environment, a Wayne State ecosystem.

**In national conversations, there's often a negative stigma attached to Detroit. How did you help change that?**

I wanted to make sure the story of Wayne State was truly told. Therefore, when I came, there was more stuff in the press. I was on television and radio programs, I wrote op-ed pieces for the newspaper. ... Wayne State is a unique institution. It sits in the heart of a city that reached rock bottom, and it stayed here when many other institutions left. Nothing could be designed from scratch today that is like Wayne. ... It has grown as a part of the city. It has built this city. It has been the soul of this city when the soul had been drained out of it. This university stayed, provided support, and there's much more to do.

**What was the impetus behind TechTown and CitizenDetroit?**

After building a community and making Wayne State a more residential campus, connecting the laboratory and real-life in TechTown was, I think, my single most important contribution. I called a bunch of people — Henry Ford and DMC and so on — and said, "I would love to build a research and technology park where our scholars and researchers had a laboratory to work with entrepreneurs." It's a center for people ... who had ideas but didn't have the knowledge to put together a business plan.

I'm also proud we can reach out to Detroit. When the city was on the verge of bankruptcy, everybody was talking at the citizens, but nobody was talking to them. They heard nothing but negative stuff and they had no part in the conversation. Furthermore, they were going to lose their democracy because of an emergency manager. The governor had appointed me to an oversight committee and Sheila Cockrel was a former member



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— IRVIN D. REID

of the City Council. We decided to create a forum for citizens to talk to each other about their democracy, about their future, about the institutions of this city. That's how CitizenDetroit got started. We bring people together, serve dinner, set eight to 10 at a table, and ask them to make a budget or talk about problems. At the end of the evening, they present solutions.

**What is the FOCIS' African Democracy Project?**

In 1998, I made a trip to Southern Africa and I also had a connection to a fellow who was very close to the president of Namibia. I was with the president on their election day. I found out as we conversed he was not allowed to run for president a third time. But he rationalized he could, because the first time he served, he was not elected by the people — the party put him in as a result of the settling of the civil war. It occurred to me that I would love to give students the opportunity to study democracy in Africa. Ten years later, the former president of Mozambique got the Mo Ibrahim Award for "engaging in good practices in democracy." I sent him an email and I heard back from him that very afternoon. Nov. 6 of 2008, I was sitting down with the second president of the Republic of Mozambique telling him about my dream ... and he said ... "why don't you bring them here next year, during our presidential election?" That's how the African Democracy Project started. The goal is to go to the country at the time of the election or somewhere thereabout, after studying that country the entire semester ... I think it's life-changing for [students]. There's a connection to Africa for all of us, and I think that connection is best seen when they get there and see how much similarity there really is in people.

**You've filmed your interactions with African presidents. Will that be available to the public?**

Leaders in African Democracy will be a series of half-hour interviews one on one with different African presidents. But I also want an integrated documentary telling the story of these leaders. Not just the ones today, but some of their predecessors. I hope by 2018 to have that done. ■

## RESUME

### NAME

Irvin D. Reid

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### AGE

76

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### HOMETOWN

Pawley's Island, S.C.

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### EDUCATION

- Bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology from Howard University
- Master's and Ph.D. in business and applied economics from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania
- Certificate in educational administration from Harvard University

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### TIMELINE

**1997:** Began as Wayne State University president  
**2000:** TechTown founded  
**2001:** Launched Wayne First, the university's first capital campaign  
**2008:** Left Wayne State University presidency  
**2009:** Headed first African Democracy Project Trip to Mozambique  
**2012:** Established the community forum, CitizenDetroit

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### SELECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Austrian-American Council of North America's
- Austrian-American Medal (1995)
- Howard University's Distinguished Postgraduate Achievement Award in Education and Administration (1999)
- *The Detroit News* top 12 Michiganians of the Year (2000)
- *Crain's Detroit Business* Newsmaker of the Year (2002)
- Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year in the Central Great Lakes Region (2006)