

From Happy Hill Gardens to RJR Tobacco's Chemistry Lab

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How does an African-American male born the second of six children to a single mother in Happy Hill Gardens manage to claim two college degrees from Salem College — one in 1996, the other in 1997 — when the obstacles are stacked against him? According to Charles Ortega Brooks, "You do it with faith — there is no other force on earth that will enable you to accomplish those things that seem impossible. My mother Lillie Mae Brooks gave me the tools to endure."

Session 225 of the commencement exercises of Salem College took place in the May Dell on Saturday, May 24, at 10 a.m.

we made it," said Ms. Brooks.

Brooks says that completing two degrees so close together was quite challenging. He started the journey in 1991 while working full-time during the day and going to school in the evening. He is currently a research and development associate at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, where he analyzes tobacco products. He took three or four classes per semester to complete both programs.

"It is a lonely journey. There are sacrifices I had to make and obstacles I had to overcome. I eventually saw that I was no longer in control of destiny. When I discovered that I was fulfilling God's purpose for me, that's when the journey became easy," Charles said.



Charles Brooks greeted his mother, Lillie Mae Brooks, and his nephew Julian Brooks after graduation.

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— Charles Ortega Brooks

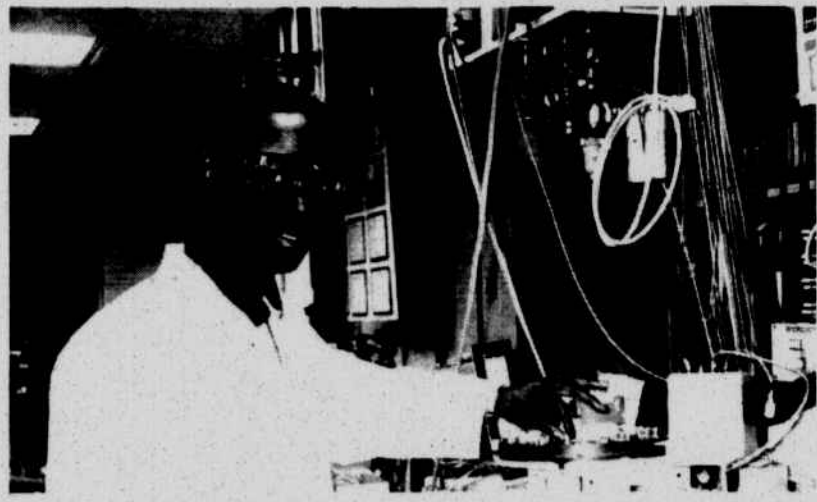
According to Ms. Sheppard, Brooks is the only African-American male to graduate from Salem College with two degrees. According to her, Brooks was highly visible on campus although he was an evening student. He was a member of Salem Connections, a program that allows students to reach out among the student body to discover its diversity. "His high spirits and fellowship with students was clear to all who came in contact with him," Sheppard said. Dr. Alice Patterson, dean of continuing education at Salem, commended his "zest for living" and his "courageous way of facing life." She said she is proud to have him as a Salem College alum.

Brooks' business degree from Salem is already opening doors.

to the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company for giving him the opportunity to cross train in another department. He said he will miss all of his colleagues in the lab but looks forward to trying his wings.

Several of his colleagues and family members sponsored a graduation party in his honor following the commencement exercises. He cited the names of five mentors: Janet Wheeler, Brenda Hodge, Lynn Beasley, Harold Threatt, and Dr. Carl Ehmann.

He is proud to be a graduate of Salem College. "I fit Salem, and Salem fit me because I recognize and appreciate the intellect, the strength, the resolve, the power of the female that comes from my mother. These qualities enable one to overcome insurmountable odds,"



Charles Brooks places a sample vial in the sample tray in the chemistry lab at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

Charles was the only male among the 164 graduates. This year he completed his bachelor's degree in business administration with a minor in marketing; last year, he completed his bachelor's degree in chemistry. "I am truly overjoyed today. This is our second time, and

He was greatly inspired by his mother, Lillie Mae Brooks, who earned her high school diploma from Forsyth Technical Community College in 1989. While working as a custodian at Union Cross Elementary School and working two jobs, she completed

high school in three years. "My mother is some lady," he said, fighting back the tears. "She never gave up in the midst of the obstacles she faced. She is a survivor," he said.

"With determination and faith in God as my master, I have come this far. I try to share Him with everybody," said Ms. Brooks. Charles, she says is a son that any mother would be proud of. "He knows what he wants to do, and he does it," she said.

Although Brooks' mother was a strong encourager, there were many other motivators along the way. The challenge to provide a secure future for his son Jason gave Brooks endurance. "We are responsible for the next generation. The more we grow and enhance ourselves, the more value we can add to their lives," he said. Brooks also believes that he has a responsibility to his cultural heritage. "If we can perse-

vere and succeed, we can serve as examples for others to follow. We must resolve to continue for the sake of the community," he said.

Brooks' community involvement is connected to his graduation from the Project Blueprint program. He serves on the United Way Distribution Fund Committee and on the Board of Step One. Step One offered him the chance to have an impact on "one of the most devastating problems in the black community — substance abuse." This objective also keeps him moving forward.

Another motivating factor in his success was his advisor Vicki Sheppard, assistant dean of continuing studies. She is very special to him because when things were the most difficult, she was very encouraging. She advised him to pursue the business administration degree to make himself more marketable.



Brooks greets one of his mentors in the Chemistry department, Janet Wheeler.

This summer he will move to the Marketing Department to complete a summer internship with Camel in Brand Marketing. Getting his chemistry degree improved his analytical skills, but business and marketing are areas of achievement that come natural. He said he is grateful

he said. His mother, Lillie Mae Brooks, is ready for the next task. Brooks' next objective is to pursue his MBA. "I'm ready for it. I know he can do it. He can accomplish anything he chooses to," Ms. Brooks said.

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