

BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS SPEAKS WITH
GAIL WILSON AWAN OF URBAN LEAGUE OF THE UPSTATE



*Gail Wilson Awan with Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D.
Photo by Terry E. Manning, USC Upstate*

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with Dr. Gail Wilson Awan, president and CEO of the Urban League of the Upstate. (This interview has been edited for content, clarity, and length.)

Harris: You've described your journey as winding — from performing arts aspirations to nonprofit leadership. How did your early background, like launching the Museum of York County's first Africa Alive celebration, shape your vision for the Urban League of the Upstate?

Awan: "Winding" definitely describes my trajectory. Some people seem to know what they want, and every benchmark is clear. That wasn't me. At each stage I thought, "This is it." Then something happened, and it felt like a derailment. Looking back, I see that was always the trail.

At the Museum of York County, where I worked as a graduate student at Winthrop, there was a collection of African animal artifacts. That's important, but I asked myself, "What am I contributing?" Natural history is only part of the story. Where are the people? Where's the culture? For me, the question became: how do we add to the story that already exists?

Harris: Over the last four years in this role, you've been described as a "quiet storm" — calm, but impactful. You've led the Urban League of the Upstate through important growth and change. What experiences shaped your leadership style the most?

Awan: The Urban League and USC Upstate share a common thread: we both went through name changes.

Harris: Yes, we were the University of South Carolina Spartanburg.

Awan: And we were the Greenville Urban League. A simple name change can change everything for generations.

Leadership builds on predecessors. They each contributed something of value. My job is to add to that. My talents may differ, but I can only do what I can do.

Harris: Not every institution does a name change well. But I've seen productive work come out of the Urban League of the Upstate. Leadership often means making tough calls. How do you balance the heart and the head in those moments?

Awan: I could probably use a little more heart.

First, there are those we serve. Then there are our employees. But there's also the institution itself. For me, the institution is like another being. That's where my head and heart must stay, because everything else can and will change. My north star is always: What's the best decision, right now, for the institution I serve?

Harris: For those who may not be as familiar, how do you describe the mission and work of the Urban League of the Upstate?

Awan: The Urban League has been around since 1910. We are a historic civil rights organization. Our role is to serve those who need us, through economic stability, housing, jobs, and workforce advocacy. Programs and names may change, but our core principles never do. That consistency is comforting. In other places I've been, the mission felt fuzzy, shifting with the latest buzzword. Here, it's clear. We know who we are and who we serve.

Harris: While the NAACP and others focused on social justice, the



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Urban League historically focused on economic development and growth. That meant helping people get jobs in urban communities. How does that play out today?

Awan: During the civil rights era, the Urban League was one of the Big Five. Dr. King's platform was the church. The NAACP focused on legal issues. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee focused on activism. Whitney Young, who led the Urban League, believed progress required a multi-pronged approach.

Our mission was to be at the table, close enough to influence policy, and to be trusted thought partners with policymakers. That's why we brought corporate CEOs onto our boards. Workforce development and jobs were central, so we had to be where decisions about jobs were being made.

Harris: That makes me think of Vernon Jordan, who ensured there was presence in boardrooms. Today, Fortune 50 and Fortune 500 companies like UPS and Delta Airlines have diverse boards. That's the type of leadership the Urban League continues to influence.

Awan: We have to be responsive to our unique region. The Upstate has both metropolitan areas like Greenville and Spartanburg and small rural counties. You can't stamp one model across all 10 counties.

For example, in Greenville and Anderson, our focus has been health and wellness. We were gifted the historic McClaren Medical Shelter, the first Black hospital in Greenville during segregation. Dr. E.E. McClaren built it next to his home in 1949, with private patient rooms, which was a radical idea at the time. We're renovating it now. Architecturally it's a plain square building, but some stories are bigger than bricks and mortar.

Harris: What does that building mean to you personally and to the Urban League's mission?

Awan: Personally, it represents courage. Dr. McClaren built it in 1949, the same year as the last lynching in Greenville. He invested \$15,000 of his own money during a time of racial terror. That took courage. Our stories, both past and present, always include courage. You need vision, and you need courage to act on it.

Harris: That courage is something I hope to instill in our students. We stand on the shoulders of people like Dr. McClaren who sacrificed for us to experience opportunity. Preserving these stories keeps that legacy alive.

Awan: Yes. Too often our history disappears. Erase the places, and you erase the people.

Harris: Let's talk more about leadership. What role do you see young professionals

playing in shaping an equitable Upstate?

Awan: They're our seeds, already growing. Too often leaders fear giving up power. But I'm proud of the young professionals at the Urban League. They're sharing their stories and leading now.

Harris: What advice would you give young leaders?

Awan: Bring your skills and abilities fully, because you never know where an opportunity will lead or who you'll meet. And be ready to learn what you don't know. How you handle that moment determines where you go next.



Talent alone isn't enough. Without support, it goes unrealized, and everyone loses. Poverty, lack of access, inequities in housing, education, and jobs — these are the civil rights issues of today. We must build trusted relationships, influence policy, and protect basic rights like voting and education. No one can be left out.

Harris: You're one of the best networkers I know. Where did you learn how to do that?

Awan: Probably from my parents. My mom was organic; people were drawn to her. My dad, a military man, was strategic. He learned to read a room for survival. From them I learned that preparation matters. Sometimes it's exhausting, but you can't just show up. You have to do the work before you walk in.

Harris: Recently, during a film industry event on campus, you yielded the spotlight to others, even though it was your work that made it possible. Many leaders want every photo and every soundbite. But you'd already done the work. What were you thinking in that moment?

Awan: Two things. First, I'm an introvert, though some say an introvert masquerading as an extrovert. Second, like in an art gallery, you need to step back to see the whole picture. I wanted to observe interactions and dynamics. And I saw that event as one of my most impactful professional accomplishments, not because of the moment itself, but because of what it opened the door to. The

stage was set for long-term impact.

Harris: So what challenges must we confront to ensure opportunity is accessible to all?

Awan: Talent alone isn't enough. Without support, it goes unrealized, and everyone loses. Poverty, lack of access, inequities in housing, education, and jobs — these are the civil rights issues of today. We must build trusted relationships, influence policy, and protect basic rights like voting and education. No one can be left out.

Harris: If you could give one piece of encouragement to the next generation of leaders, what would it be?

Awan: Lead with authenticity, passion, and compassion. We don't have the luxury of alienating others when lives are at stake. I can't be offended by everything. I have to take the next right step. It's not about me.

Harris: We talk about leading below the line — the unseen layers beneath the surface when we lead. How do you approach that?

Awan: Most of leadership happens below the line. You need to know where you're going, but also be intuitive. Feel the undercurrents, notice the obstacles, and adjust. Voice is part of that, too. We want young leaders to use their voices, but to also craft carefully what they truly want to say.

Harris: Voice and calling come from the same Latin root. When I speak, I'm speaking my calling. Is it to unite or divide, to destroy or to build? Words carry that weight.

Awan: If we connect voice to calling, that's powerful.

Harris: Your mother was a historic re-enactor, portraying enslaved women. How did that heritage shape your leadership?

Awan: My mother was a gifted storyteller. She internalized the lives of those she portrayed. People from all over the world connected with her authenticity. Even as she struggled with dementia later, that identity stayed with her. Her work was a calling. It taught me the power of authenticity and empathy in leadership.

Harris: Do you have a quote or mantra that resonates with you?

Awan: Two. First, from Vernon Jordan: "But there will come a time and a place to give back, and each individual will recognize that time and place." For me, the Urban League is that time and place, when all the winding paths make sense.

The second quote is something like, "Choose the problems worthy of your life. We can't take on everything. But we must choose problems worth giving our lives to."