

Tulane's own Yolanda Robinson-Windsay honors her mom as Unified Commencement vocalist

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bbronst@tulane.edu



Jazz singer Yolanda Robinson-Windsay, left, joined her mother, gospel and jazz vocalist Topsy Chapman, for "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" at Tulane's 2017 Unified Commencement ceremony. Robinson-Windsay received her master's degree that same year. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

Yolanda Robinson-Windsay was a mere three years old when she joined the gospel choir at her church. She's been singing ever since, bringing her soulful voice to venues across New Orleans, including Snug Harbor, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Satchmo Fest.

Performing comes naturally to Windsay, who works by day as an assistant administrator in the business office of Tulane University and performs at night and on weekends with her son and sister as part of the trio Solid Harmony. She is rarely nervous before she goes on stage, and even when she is, she hides it well.

But there is one annual engagement that always has butterflies fluttering in her stomach — the one that happens towards the end of Tulane’s Unified Commencement when she joins Dr. Michael White’s Original Liberty Jazz Band for one of the Crescent City’s signature theme songs, “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?”

Her mother, the late gospel and jazz vocalist Topsy Chapman, had sung the song at Commencement since 2013, replacing jazz singer Wanda Rouzan, who sang it from 2000-12. The tradition dates back to 1999 — the year of the first Unified Commencement — when blues singer Marva Wright served as the inaugural songstress.

When Windsay inherited the job from an ailing Chapman in 2022, she was determined to do her mother proud as well as make an impact on the thousands of people in attendance at the ceremony, especially the graduates. And make an impact she and all those singers before her have done, never failing to bring tears and induce chills when the words are sung:

*“Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans
And miss it each night and day
I know I'm not wrong this feeling's gettin' stronger
The longer, I stay away.”*

“I get nervous every time, because I think of how impactful and powerful I want this song to come across,” said Windsay, whose mother and several aunts and uncles were part of the gospel group the Chapman Singers. “There’s something about that atmosphere, singing in front of all of these students. These students have been here a few years and have gotten to know and love the city the way I do.”

“This past Commencement, I remember walking off stage and passing a group of students who told me how much they enjoyed my performance. They said, ‘You did such a wonderful job. We enjoyed it so much.’ I was so touched at how much it meant to them.”

Windsay's first opportunity to sing at Commencement occurred in 2017 when she and her mother sang together. Windsay was one of 2,800 graduates that year, having received a Master of Liberal Arts degree from the Tulane School of Professional Advancement.

"My mom said, 'Wouldn't it be fun if we could sing together?' And I said, 'I don't think that'll happen.' But I decided that since I work at Tulane and I was also getting my master's degree, I'd ask. The answer was, 'Yes, that would be great. We're excited and looking forward to it.' "

Chapman sang on her own the following year, then fell ill with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a lung disease that makes it difficult to breathe. Her doctor encouraged her to continue singing — if she thought she could — and Chapman did just that, even singing for the 2020 virtual ceremony amid the COVID-19 pandemic. She passed away in November 2022 at age 75.

"I took over after COVID, and I've been doing it ever since," Windsay said. "I think of my Mom every day especially whenever I sing. She wanted me to continue singing for Commencement as well as other events like private functions and festivals, and she expressed this before she passed. She would be very pleased."

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