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From basketball courts to classrooms to community radio, Adrienne Coddett has been a figure in the city’s Black community for decades. Now, as schools seek out lessons about the experience of racialized minorities, she’s being recognized for her work — and given a platform like never before.

As Adrienne Coddett gears up for her most challenging job yet at Woodroffe High School, where she has taught for 21 years, she is anxious and excited. Excited because she wants to affect as much change as she can, anxious because she sees her job as nothing less than radically transforming the education system.

After a career spent quietly doing great things under the radar, Coddett is about to take on more leadership, more power, and wield more influence — and it couldn’t have come at a better time. As schools across the country examine their curriculums with an eye to addressing racism, Coddett will be at the centre of a lot of hard discussions. That’s because she’s bringing decades of experience with Black youth to her job as head of social sciences and business at Woodroffe High School, where the first language of nearly half the students is not English.

“In 21 years, I still have a closer relationship with the Black students in the building than any of my colleagues,” Coddett wrote in her impassioned application letter for the job. “We have a similar, lived experience. In 2020, I watch young people go through the same thing I went through. ... Accusations that the work you handed in could not be yours because it’s too good. Low expectations... .” However, she continued, the moment called for her to lead. “As a Black educator, I am also present to the community understanding about being a teacher — I represent for my communities what is possible through education.”

As department head, Coddett will be a liaison between board administration and the teachers, telling them about workshops and other opportunities. But she also makes clear that she will use this job to show how instruction can be inclusive and equitable.

“I’ve grown up inside a family of educators and activists,” she says, “and I have always believed that teachers should be activists. It’s part of your job to bring the community into the school and the school into the community. What is different now is that I’m now being acknowledged and recognized for it.”

She lists ways in which she, as a Black teacher, has been subjected to racism: being policed, questioned, and chastized; low expectations; lack of recognition. Coddett says it’s reflective of widespread effects of desegregation on Black educators. “All the same things that Black students have been complaining about, Black educators have been sucking up for years.”

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Coddett, 53, lives in Overbrook with her mother and her sister and her dog, Furious Styles, an eight-month-old Chihuahua Pug she got after a string of losses, including the death of her father. Evenings are for walking Furious around the neighbourhood she loves and other forms of self-care. “I do enjoy spending a lot of time alone,” says Coddett. “I own a motorcycle, so I participate in wind therapy quite a bit.”

The Coddett family has distinguished roots in Ottawa. Her parents were born in Guyana; mother Yvonne de Jonge arrived in Montreal in 1963, while father Randolph 'Archie' Coddett began studies at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1961. After a few years in Montreal, her dad was recruited by the federal government. Her mother earned a sociology degree at Carleton, but upon graduating opened one of the first Black-owned businesses, Nu Skin Hair Fashions, which debuted on Sparks Street in 1973 and closed its location on Parkdale in 1988. "It wasn't her career choice, but it's just what she did," says Coddett. "She has always transformed herself to do whatever her family needed." The shop also provided what the Black community needed: niche products for hair and skin.

Coddett remembers a time when all the Black people in the city knew each other. "And because of who we were and how we grew up in Ottawa, I always grew up in a Black Ottawa. Monday to Friday was white. But weekends were 100 per cent Black."

One of the more sombre gatherings in that community was following the death of Vincent Gardner in 1991. Gardner was shot during a police raid of a private residence; apparently the officer mistook the guitar under Gardner's arm for a gun. Though the Jamaican immigrant lived for another two months and his death was ultimately attributed to cancer, in the eyes of the Black community, it was a death at the hands of the police.

"These are people who you know. I grew up going to St. Laurent shopping mall, where he was a custodian. This was a man I used to see every week. Healthy. Strong. Not a thing wrong with him. We organized a protest and a vigil at the war memorial."

After graduating from Rideau High School in 1986, Coddett headed south, to the same school her father attended. "Howard University changed my life in so many, so many ways." She saw things — good and bad — that she never saw in Ottawa. She was accused

of shoplifting in a mall; she was pulled over and handcuffed when returning home from a party. But she also rallied against racism in new ways.

Family responsibilities called her back to Ottawa before she could finish her degree. She enrolled at the University of Ottawa as a social sciences major with a concentration in sociology and completed her teaching degree at the same school. After seven years as an educational assistant with the Ottawa Catholic School Board, she got her first full-time position teaching at Woodroffe in 1998.

“When they hired me, they had no clue of any training in law as an activist,” says Coddett. “As far as the board was concerned, they were looking at someone who had English and history as teachables.” She was soon also teaching physical education, tapping into her years as a national-level track athlete. And then Coddett co-founded a brand new basketball club, the Ottawa Phoenix. The goal was to help Black inner-city teenagers, many from lower-income families, play basketball in a way that emphasized discipline, teamwork, and the importance of getting good grades in school.

Soon she was on an organizing kick, bringing together Black youth and community members through such initiatives as the Black Youth Day Conference (2004-2014) and the Black Student Forum (2018-2020). She often dug into her own pockets to fund these ambitious gatherings and personally attended the International Black Summit every year from 2002 to 2015 — it was at the 2003 summit in Ghana that she was given her “born-day name,” Afua.

Through it all, Coddett makes it clear she sees herself in the young people she teaches and coaches. “As a former athlete myself, I was very well aware of how I fell into the trap of thinking that my athletics would solve all my problems. I frequently listened to anyone willing to keep the standard low. I promised to not be that kind of coach.”

The approach certainly made an impact on former Phoenix player Gary Gallimore. “My parents were working nights and weekends, and there’s Adrienne, who is taking us on road trips to play basketball, taking the responsibility for anything that happens to us. Through all that stuff, we were able to build a really strong bond. One of trust.”

Gallimore also played basketball for Coddett at Woodroffe. “She was a mystery. She was Black. She had dreads. She wore athletic clothes. Even when she wasn’t teaching gym, she loved really nice sneakers. Miss Coddett is one of the funniest people I know.”

Gallimore, who is now a manager at Canada Post and a statistics teacher at Algonquin College, says he passes the lesson of self-confidence taught to him by Coddett to his four children. “The other day I told my daughter, ‘don’t let anybody call you stupid, because you’re gonna start believing it.’ When I look at what she did for the community, it’s these kinds of lessons she was trying to convey: We are people, too; work hard, and you should be valued.”

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The basketball court became the backdrop for a controversial moment this summer in Ottawa, when school board trustee Donna Blackburn approached a 17-year-old Black youth in a park that had been closed because of COVID-19. She told him to leave,

warned him he would end up in prison if he didn't follow the rules, threatened to follow him home, and posted his photo on social media. Blackburn was formally censured, her colleagues voting unanimously to penalize her as much as their code of conduct would allow. Even Education Minister Stephen Lecce called for Blackburn's resignation. "It was shameful, it was racist, and it was an abuse of her privilege," Lecce said. "It's clear that this trustee must do the right thing and step down." But Blackburn knew her place in the system was protected, and she remains an OCDSB trustee.

Coddett calls this "self-appointed policing of a Black body" and asks why no one questioned Blackburn's reason for being out in public. "So the benefit of the doubt that she refused to give a young person, she expects and is extended." What Coddett hopes people learn from the incident is that there are problems with the system and the only way to fix them is to get involved. "If you are a democracy-loving believer in the system, prepare and run against Blackburn, and take your seat at the table."

As a teacher, one of Coddett's tactics is to bring history makers into the class to speak to the students. One such guest was Minnijean Brown-Trickey, who made headlines as a 15-year-old high school student at Little Rock Central High School in 1957 who faced down authorities as she tried to enter the school. Brown-Trickey and her fellow African-American students became known as the Little Rock Nine, their story pivotal in the push for school desegregation in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Another was Adam Jones, the Canadian veteran and former Carleton University student who was injured in training who went on to become a Team Canada Invictus Games participant. He spoke to her students as part of a Remembrance Day commemoration about his great-great-grandfather, Jeremiah Jones. The Black First World War veteran is remembered for his bravery during the 1917 Battle of Vimy Ridge. (In 2010, Jones was posthumously awarded the Canadian Forces Distinguished Service Medallion.)

Coddett also holds court with distinguished history-makers at *Black on Black*, a CHUO 89.1 radio show that operates out of the University of Ottawa. As a co-host for 28 years, she has developed a strong network that includes American activist Deborah Peterson Small, the Harvard-educated lawyer whose advocacy has shone a light on the disproportionate effect U.S. drug laws have had in communities of colour. “[Small] is a friend,” says Coddett. “So I’m able to bring her on air — she’s our regular person we can come to whenever we want to have a dialogue about Black in America.”



In Studio: at left, Coddett stands with Caroline Xavier, assistant to the deputy minister of immigration, and co-host Jacqueline Lawrence. At right, guest Judith Headley and co-host Denise Isaac pose with Coddett after a Black on Black session promoting Caribbean Culture Days.

Says co-host Jacqueline Lawrence, who works with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board on diversity and equity strategies: “Kids have been on a waiting list to get into her classroom. [Students] have spoken about how she’s different, how she’s for them and she engages kids in learning. She’s not your typical teacher. She’s an experiential teacher... Kids are learning about each other as they learn the curriculum.”

Another show host, Sarah Onyango, who is also a Black History Ottawa board member, says she has seen the effect Coddett has had on the city. “Adrienne has been recruiting young people from the high schools to connect them with community members who are

doing interesting things,” says Onyango. “And later you see these young people, and you know that’s an Adrienne Coddett mentee right there. There’s a trademark. Just like her basketball players with Phoenix, you know these are Adrienne’s kids.”

Black on Black chronicled a lot of Ottawa’s growth with segments reflecting the city’s increased diversity. As the community continued to grow, so did Coddett’s activism. From her roles coaching basketball, hosting radio, teaching, and spearheading forums for Black youth, she has continuously fostered safe spaces to discuss racism, low self-esteem, and the other problems faced by the community over the years.

According to an analysis of Statistics Canada data, in 1986 countries including Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Haiti were among the top countries of birth for Ottawa’s Black population. Between 1996 and 2016, African countries, including Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, took top spot. The Black population aged 15 years and over more than doubled — from 25,105 in 2001 to 56,220 in 2016 — over the past 20 years, and that number is expected to increase in the 2021 census.

“[Coddett] would have been part of that early generation that would have provided community leadership, mentorship, and a role model for many people, not just in Ottawa,” says Malinda Smith, an expert in equity, diversity, and inclusion at the University of Calgary.

“I always felt like an oddball because I was born in Ottawa. All my friends had arrived as children from the Caribbean or parts of Africa,” says Coddett. “I wasn’t a Black Canadian like my Halifax friends. And I wasn’t a Black Canadian like my immigrant friends. I always felt interestingly different.”



Left: Jacqueline Lawrence and Adrienne Coddett outside the CBC studio after an interview about the 2013 International Black Summit. Right: Coddett with Denise Siele at the CHUO studio before boarding a bus taking Ottawa youth to see Barack Obama speak in May 2019.

“Adrienne has definitely been the most impactful person in my life, aside from my family. So, there is something quite special there,” says Soyini Cornette, who first met Coddett 21 years ago as a Woodroffe High School student. She remembers Coddett struggling to put the conferences together. “To me, that is the pinnacle for Black lives to matter in Ottawa. Because nobody else was organizing conferences to empower Black youth back then. And with every setback and obstacle, she fought harder,” says Cornette, who now works as a senior manager at Environment and Climate Change Canada. Ask Cornette what she learned from those conferences and she replies emphatically: “She helped me feel empowered as a Black youth and to feel comfortable in my skin. As I became a young woman, she helped me to see the greatness that I had within, which I didn’t recognize within myself. This in turn has shaped me into the Black woman that I am today.”

And now Coddett hopes to wield some of that influence in her new job at Woodroffe. As a department head, she will push for more diverse themes in the curriculum, including anti-Black racism.

She may see herself as an under-achiever who took seven years to complete high school and needed two attempts to get into the University of Ottawa's teaching program, but she will keep fighting, laughing, and teaching and using her years of experience to make the city more inclusive.