Alumna recalls trailblazing career in business, ministry

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Peggy Gibson (MBA '75), second from right, poses with classmates at her 50-year MBA reunion celebration, which took place at Common House on Nov. 14, 2025. Pictured along wth Gibson are, from left to right, Wayne Brafford (MBA '75), Arnulfo Rodriguez-Gonzalez (MBA '75) and Philip Wetz (MBA '75).

Peggy Gibson (MBA ’75) has led a life of firsts.

As a five-year-old in 1957, she was the first African American to be admitted to the YMCA in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. In 1976, she became the first African American to work at the IBM St. Louis Large System’s office as a marketing representative. In 2016 she became the first female pastor at St. Paul United Methodist Church in Moss Point, Mississippi.

And in 1973 she was one of the first seven African American students admitted to the Freeman School’s Joint MBA program with Xavier University.

“It's just been an incredible journey,” she says. “The hand of God has been over me my whole life.”

Gibson, who went on to work for a series of Fortune 500 companies, including IBM and AT&T, was raised in a middle-class household in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. She came of age in the Deep South amid the racial tumult of the 1950s and 1960s but remembers an idyllic childhood that was, at first, largely free of discrimination. Her hometown was progressive for its time, and she says that while African Americans in other parts of Mississippi were treated differently, she could participate in normal leisure activities, like enjoying an ice cream at a local diner in downtown Ocean Springs.

It wasn’t until Gibson, in search of a more rigorous curriculum, enrolled in a desegregated high school that she felt the sting of discrimination.

“I had loved math since I was a 5-year-old when my daddy taught me my numbers,” she says. “I wanted to major in math, but I had taken all the math courses they offered at Nichols High School, so I switched to Biloxi High.”

When it was time to enroll in college, her counselors at Biloxi High discouraged her from even applying.

“The counselors at Biloxi High told me I wasn’t college material,” she says. “I didn’t believe that. Discrimination is just a fact of this broken world, but I don’t let it discourage me. I let it feed me and fertilize me instead of letting it defeat me. I walked right back over to Nichols High, and a counselor there helped me get into Xavier University.”

Gibson found a home at Xavier University of Louisiana, a private, historically black Catholic university in New Orleans, where she put her love of numbers to use, majoring in math and minoring in computer science and physics.

It was at Xavier that she learned of a unique opportunity that would change her life: The Tulane/Xavier Joint MBA program.

The pioneering program was launched in 1973 by chemicals manufacturer Olin Corp., which awarded Tulane $326,250 to establish scholarships for Xavier students. Under the terms of the program, students could enroll in Tulane's MBA program as seniors, with credits applying jointly toward their undergraduate degrees at Xavier and graduate degrees at Tulane.

Gibson, alongside fellow Xavier classmates Larry Rivarde, Joanell Darnell, Leon Jones, Adam Lemieux, Joyce Morgan and Glenn Philips, was one of the first students admitted.



Members of the first Tulane/Xavier Joint MBA Program cohort. Left to right, Glenn Philips, Joyce Morgan, Leon Jones, Peggy Gibson and Larry Rivarde.

"I was blessed to be selected," she says. "My objective was to learn all I could at Tulane."

As exciting as the opportunity was, it was also a challenge.

“Not only was I the only Black person in my finance class at Tulane, but I was the only female. In a situation like that you have this feeling like, ‘I’m here, but I’m not here.’”

Despite that, “The professors gave us a fair chance,” she says.

She and her cohort also leaned on each other for support.

“We were trailblazers, and we felt the pressure of having to succeed,” she says. “The Xavier cohort banded together. We worked together and studied together so that, collectively, we could succeed.”

Having undertaken a grueling courseload — 60 credit hours in a year and a half — Gibson became one of the first African Americans to graduate with a Freeman MBA. Her degree carried her to St. Louis, where she got a job as an assistant buyer at the May Company department store and then as a computer applications sales consultant at IBM.

Eventually, she landed her dream job as a technical specialist at AT&T, where she designed and implemented data and voice networks for large corporations.

“When I walked in the door at AT&T, they told me they were making $2 million a minute,” she says. “It was an exciting time. I did all the technical stuff, routing and programming networks for large customers. I loved designing communications networks that would take care of all of a customer’s needs.”

Gibson remained at AT&T for 20 years before changing paths once again. She was sitting at her desk one day in November 2001 when she recalls telling herself, “I wish I could spend more time in the Word of God.”

When AT&T subsequently sent her a letter telling her she would be retired on Jan. 31, 2002, it confirmed her earlier epiphany as a call from God.

“God spoke to me,” she says. “He told me he wanted me to build up his people. Hearing his words was like a fire in my belly.”

Two months later, in February 2002, Gibson enrolled in Memphis Theological Seminary as a Georgia Harkness Scholar. She completed her Master of Divinity in

2008 and went on to complete a Doctor of Ministry in 2021 from Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. In 2015, she received the Emma Elzy Award, which recognizes outstanding achievement in racial reconciliation and healing within the United Methodist Church.

After pastoring and serving communities throughout Mississippi for 20 years, Gibson retired but remains active in the church — and her alma mater.

In 2025, she served on her Freeman MBA reunion committee and attended her MBA class's 50-year reunion, where she was inducted into the Tulane Emeritus Club, which recognizes alumni who graduated more than fifty years ago.

"I had a blast at the reunion," she says. "I went to the Tulane game, and it was like I was right back in the 1970s."

Looking back on her life, Gibson offers a reflection reminiscent of Tulane's motto: *Non sibi, sed suis.*

"The thing I've learned is that you have to have an internal drummer. It's that drum major's instinct that Martin Luther King talked about. You can be the first, but it has to be in service to others."