

Carrying Reserve Values into the Nation's Capital

WRA alumna and 2018 Marticke Speaker Dr. Menna Demessie '98 uses the lessons she learned at Reserve when working for policy change in Washington, D.C.

No two days are the same for Dr. Menna Demessie '98. As the Vice President of Policy Analysis and Research at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc. (CBCF), Demessie is the leader for research and policy initiatives, and her work impacts critical areas such as education, criminal justice, voting and more — specifically for the African American and global black communities.

On top of this, Demessie is the founder and co-managing editor for the CBCF's *Journal of the Center for Policy Analysis and Research*, a multidisciplinary journal analyzing public policy. Notably, she has experience working on democratic governance and gender equality in Benin, Ethiopia, Liberia and Nigeria. In recognition of her success in securing funding for D.C.'s African community, Demessie was awarded the Community Advocacy Award in Columbia in 2016 by District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser. Recently, she was appointed by the Prime Minister of Ethiopia to serve as Secretary of the Ethiopian Diaspora Trust Fund Advisory Council, promoting economic development in the region. All of this is a very much abbreviated summary of Demessie's long and impressive list of responsibilities and accomplishments.

She also serves on the Board of Visitors at Reserve.

To put it simply, Demessie is no stranger to hard work — a trait not uncommon for the Reserve grad. Demessie received her joint PhD in political science and public policy from the University of Michigan, the same school that former Head of School Dr. Henry E. "Skip" Flanagan Jr. attended and mentioned often, with great pride.

"I always knew that I wanted to learn about institutions and the power of people to change their communities and the world," she shared. "After I finished my undergrad at Oberlin College, I worked for Jones Day in Downtown Cleveland, trying to figure out if law school was what I wanted to do. That was a really powerful, eye-opening year for me, because I realized how much I loved openly debating issues and politics from both sides, which wasn't ideal when litigating a case."

She's a self-described academic at heart, and her love for and focus on policy issues and how they affect change drew her to D.C.



It's a career path that she's immensely proud of and one that has allowed her to do exactly what she had hoped to achieve.

"The nature of the work — the impact of research, data and effectively messaging to Congress — can truly make a tremendous difference in forwarding good public policy," she said. "I learned a lot in graduate school from mentors and scholars who supported my research exploring the ways in which political representation for racial and ethnic minority groups is shifting as Congress catches up with the times. I've also been fortunate to open doors for future scholar practitioners looking for meaningful career paths that allow them to apply their expertise to solve real-world problems."

She shared that since 1976, the CBCF has demonstrated a true dedication to opening doors to students. The foundation is invested in fellowships and, notably, paid internships (a rarity in the capital) and free housing for young Americans looking to get involved in policy.

"I love my job because our mission invests in education and young people," she said. "The CBCF's Leadership Institute gets a constant flow of young people from all over the country to work on the Hill. Furthermore, there's been a realization and acknowledgment that there really isn't enough diversity in legislative staff on Capitol Hill, which can relate to the kind of policy issue solutions (or lack thereof) that come out of Congress. So a lot of people in the House and Senate are trying to create better pipelines to bring a more diverse group of people into their staff — and they can look to CBCF as a model that has been doing this for decades."

She harbors a true passion for bringing educational opportunities to young minds. Perhaps this is what makes her so suited to teach.

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“I teach undergraduates as an adjunct professor at the University of California, Washington Center,” she added. “I think if I would have done anything else, I might have become a college professor. I love learning from students just as much as teaching them.”

In working with students from all over the country — from the West Coast to the East Coast — Demessie is able to impress upon her students the internal workings of Congress and establishment politics and its influence on governance and representation at the federal level.

“It’s an important balance for me, to understand that the work we do is not just about number crunching and publishing reports, but also about capturing the minds, hearts and collective spirit that encourages people together to advance humanity for the better when given clear and accessible information about how policy is impacting their daily life,” she said. “And when I go to the classroom in the evenings with my students from across the country, I’m constantly reminded of how critical it is for the next generation of leaders to understand the importance of truly appreciating and engaging with diverse groups of people as much as they are with public policies.”

There is an opportunity in her classroom to share experience and firsthand knowledge with her students, and Demessie takes full advantage of their time and attention. Her course entitled “Political Advocacy and Public Opinion in a Digital Age” aims to help students perfect the art of persuasion in politics.

“We’re dealing with a lot of important topics — and students will be considering, both from an analytical and human lens, how policy can affect them as a person, their community as well as the people who don’t agree with them. These can be deeply personal and polemical issues. The point is to know how to operate in spaces where trade-offs and compromise may or may not be an option, and to still move the needle on the issues.”

She encourages her students to use empathy and open-mindedness before their feelings and personal investment, and to keep a careful balance between the two. It’s an approach she knows well and uses often in the face of political obstacles and potential dead ends.

“It’s important to me that they understand the importance of open-mindedness,” she said. “When you get too clouded and personalize your feelings toward someone who holds a different view than you, you forgo the bigger conversations on systems, data, institutions, policies and groups of people affected by an issue because you made the issue about you as

an individual.”

This is the reality of working on Capitol Hill, she said. In lieu of increasing rhetoric about political antagonism and extreme

division, she stressed the prevalence of mutual understanding and relationships across the aisle. The day-to-day practice of governance on Capitol Hill is an environment of compromise and civility between legislative staff, committees and members.

“You know, it’s the same as that proper decorum that we’re all taught at Reserve,” she described. “Those little things we learned — how we’d sit in the pew and wait to be dismissed for class or shared responsibilities in the dining hall when eating with your classmates and faculty — they soon become part of your norm. We were all on the same page and learned to work as a team. Congress operates that way. For instance, whether you walk into a Republican or Democratic office, you will be greeted by interns who will welcome you; legislative aides doing the hard work on policy issues like education, healthcare or criminal justice reform; and members of Congress working on committees to pass bills. Yes, it’s true, there are political divisions, and the media definitely puts that front and center, but there are other equally prevalent narratives that show Congress trying to work together, and that will just not make it to the TV screen because it’s not a juicy story to tell.”

When reflecting on the values of respect, tolerance and effectively working with others, Demessie keeps Reserve close to heart, as well as the people who inspire her the most.

“Both of my parents are Ethiopian immigrants,” she said. “They moved to Ohio in the mid-1970s, and their story is similar to so many others’ I’ve heard. I have a lot of admiration and respect for people who try to make a life for themselves and their kids in another country. It’s really an amazing feat to uproot yourself and embrace a completely different culture from the one you know and make it your own. My parents are my heroes. I look up to them in many ways.”

The culmination of her education and hard-earned degrees — her work at the foundation, in the classroom and more — feels like a validation of her parents’ hard work and sacrifice for her and her brother’s best chance at a bright future.

When she graduated from WRA, she gave the Commencement speech, and her father commended her for receiving the Friendship Trophy. He told her that character and respect as a noble citizen are invaluable, not just academic prowess. “It’s thanks to them that I was able to attend a school like Reserve,” she said. “It’s through their work and sacrifice that my brother and I were able to get the best education and attend this No. 1 school in the Midwest. It’s something I’m really proud of, and I’ve never taken it lightly.”