

## Mills College marks milestone with new president

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Wednesday, September 21, 2011

About a decade ago, I was leaving a gathering at the residence of then Mills College president, Janet Holmgren, when I noticed a framed photo on a wall. Intrigued, I retraced my steps to discover an image of black writer James Baldwin dancing the twist. His arms akimbo and his left leg lifted off the floor, Baldwin was beaming; his joyful visage a compelling counter to his persona as the perpetually brooding author of such works as "The Fire Next Time" and "Blues for Mister Charlie."

San Francisco photographer Phiz Mezey took the dazzling 1964 image that is among the holdings of the Mills College art museum. Friday, as Mills celebrates the inauguration of Alecia DeCoudreaux as the institution's first black president, I'm sure that the spirit of Baldwin, who died in 1987, is twisting again.

DeCoudreaux's appointment marks another milestone in the history of the women's college founded in 1852 and located on a bucolic 135-acre site in the foothills of Oakland. Lauded for its excellence in liberal arts, Mills counts among its alumnae Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, choreographer Trisha Brown, the late lesbian author Jane Rule, and sports announcer Renel Brooks-Moon, hailed as "the voice of the [San Francisco Giants](#)."

With its stunning campus, innovative degree programs and outstanding faculty, it's hard to believe that Mills was battling for survival not long ago.

In an effort to boost then declining enrollment and finances, Mills trustees voted in 1990 to admit male undergraduates (the school's graduate programs have long been open to men). The decision triggered a firestorm of protest ("better dead than coed") that garnered national media attention. During a television appearance on the then-popular "Phil Donahue Show," Mills students argued that trustees had violated tradition and undermined the [college's](#) mission to empower women. In short order, the trustees capitulated and coeducation did not come to pass.

During the ensuing presidency (1991-2011) of Holmgren, admissions skyrocketed, revenue increased and Mills gained visibility as a top-tier college dedicated to fostering leadership among women. With the landmark ascent of DeCoudreaux, Mills welcomes a distinguished attorney and business executive with a penchant for culinary-themed mystery books. "She is already a calm and steady presence ... who has made what I think are good decisions," said Elizabeth Potter, professor of women's studies. "Morale is high here."

I'm not surprised. For in addition to its stimulating intellectual environment and state-of-the-art facilities, Mills boasts an attraction that rivals the best Bay Area gourmet haunts.

Memo to President DeCoudreaux: Visit the campus Tea Shop for delectable brownies guaranteed to make

anyone twist and shout.

Former Chronicle reporter Evelyn C. White is the author of "Alice Walker: A Life" (W.W. Norton, 2004). She was a Mills College visiting scholar in 1995.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/09/21/ED861L71O2.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 14** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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