

Dr. Juanita Harris – Citizen Soldier

Golden Gardens Native Leads Partnerships, Initiatives to Keep Our Country Safe

BY Tim Fox
PHOTO BY Dalana Montgomery

As a member of the U.S. Army's Senior Executive Service (SES), Dr. Juanita Harris is one of the five highest ranking civilians in the Aviation and Missile Research, Development, and Engineering Center (AMRDEC). If she were in the military, she would hold the rank of one-star general.

To put that in context, in the entire Department of Defense, only 1,208 (less than 1%) of 742,000 civilian employees are SES members.

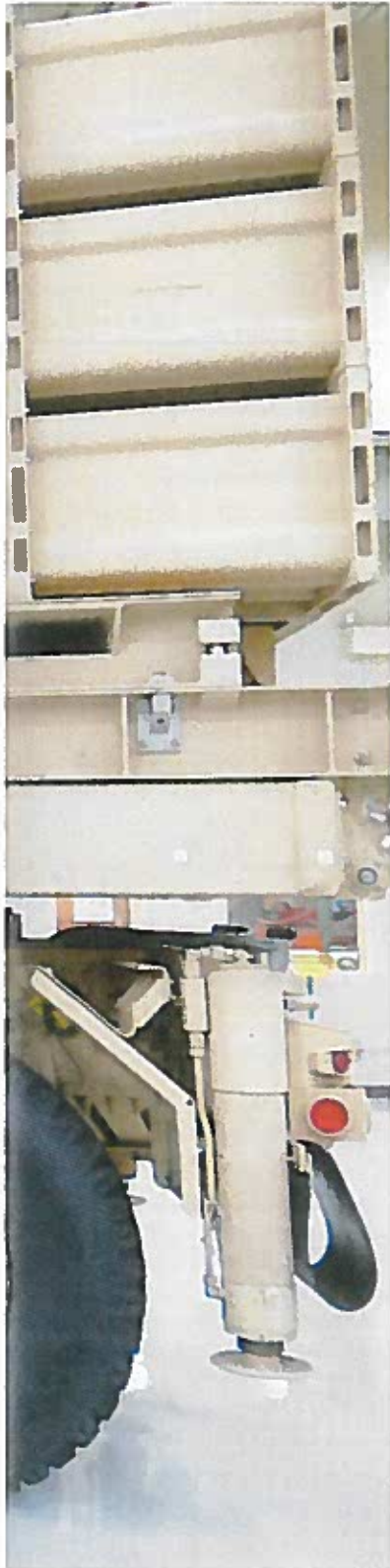
We Save the Lives of Our Soldiers

Officially, as the Director of the AMRDEC Weapons Development and Integration Directorate, she is also the first African-American woman to have been selected to the rank of SES from the Redstone Arsenal army installation in Huntsville, Alabama, where she is headquartered.

But none of that is what makes her proudest.

"If you just see me as a black female, you don't see it all," Harris says. "I bring a very diverse background to my job that is much more important. I come to the table with a lot of knowledge of software development and systems engineering, and I am very skilled at developing partnerships."

Partnerships are important for Harris because in her job, she develops cooperative research agreements with international universities and the United States' allies that allow the partners to share best practices about missile defense systems.



That intelligence leads to greater efficiencies, lower costs, better-performing systems—and saving American soldiers' lives. "At the end of the day, my ultimate concern is the soldier in the field," Harris says. "We save the lives of our soldiers. That's why I go to work every day."

East St. Louis Was Just Home to Me

Harris grew up one of eight children in the Golden Gardens neighborhood. While her mother stressed the importance of education, her father encouraged her to pursue traditional female roles, like being a housewife, nurse, or secretary.

"Still, I didn't see growing up where I did as limiting," she remembers. "East St. Louis was just home to me. Then my counselor at East St. Louis Senior High School realized I was good at science and math, and she gave me some books to read about it."

Harris looked into electrical engineering and computer engineering, finally deciding to study computer engineering in college.

She applied to the University of Illinois as a high school junior. At the time, the University of Illinois was the number one school in the country for computer engineering, and the only school offering a stand-alone degree in the subject. Harris graduated from U of I in 1985 and went straight into a permanent job with McDonnell-Douglas (now Boeing) in St. Louis, where she previously CO-OPed.

"I was hired to do computer programming, but I started working part-time on my master's in computer resources and information systems management at Webster University while working full-time on computer systems for fighter jets at McDonnell-Douglas," she says. "I have always loved being a student and learning as much as possible."

You Should Give Back in All That You Do

After completing her master's degree in 1994, Harris left McDonnell-Douglas for the RAIL Company, supporting the Aviation Command Center on Goodfellow in North St. Louis from her office in Northwest Plaza. When the command center was moved to Alabama, she worked from home for three years, supporting the Comanche Helicopter and Reconnaissance & Attack Helicopter program as a contractor.

"I have always worked on systems for the Department of Defense," Harris says. "At McDonnell-Douglas I was testing the F-18 operational flight program for the Navy, and I started writing software for the Navy A-12 stealth fighter. I supported software and systems integration activities as an Army contractor, but once I became an Army employee, I wanted to focus more on leadership."

Harris followed her dream. In 2008, she went back to school at the University of Phoenix, ultimately earning a Doctor of Management in Organizational Leadership.

"My dissertation was on mentorship, and I've established a mentorship program for the Army," she notes. "I do a lot of giving back by helping school systems establish STEM programs for youth. I believe strongly that you should give back in all that you do."

I Am Extremely Proud

Although Harris has left a lasting impact on the Army with her years of work in computer software and systems engineering, it's the application of her leadership skills that excites her the most today.

"I work with offices all over the world, as a partner, to help institutions, governments, and NATO countries leverage each other's strengths to secure grant funding for missile defense," Harris explains, adding that in a world of shrinking budgets, the partners can do more when they work together than they can on their own.

"For example, one thing that I have pushed very hard for is an agreement we are just now putting in place with the United Kingdom," Harris says. "Previous leaders did not recognize the benefits to be gained by working together, but I have opened up partnerships and even started an Industry Day to bring the players together for a common cause. I am extremely proud of that."

Next year, Harris hopes to implement agreements with Norway, and eventually Australia, Israel, and Germany. In May 2016, her supervisor, AMRDEC Executive Director James Lackey, hosted a meeting with Chile representatives, where they met with that country's military's director of projects and research to explore possible areas of collaboration.

"International cooperation leads to project and data exchange agreements that allow us to achieve our mission," Harris says. "The goal is to work together in a strategic, unified manner."

Don't Let Your Environment Define You

Harris's skills and hard work have not just been recognized by the Army. In 2015, she was one of 16 recipients of the inaugural Dred Scott Freedom Award for Government Service. Lynn M. Jackson, great-great-granddaughter of the famous slave who sued for his freedom, presented the award.

Also in 2015, Harris received the Women Honoring Women award for technology. And just a few months ago, General (R) Dennis Via, a former U.S. Army Materiel Command Commander, nominated her for the Professional Achievement-Government Award at the 21st Women of Color Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Conference in Detroit, Michigan.

"I was honored and humbled to receive these awards, but they are the culmination of everything I offer in terms of workforce development, leadership, and critical thinking skills," she says. "My next task is to help others, especially our young people, realize that they can achieve their goals, too."

As a leader, Harris of course encourages youth to work hard, do their best, study, and develop a trade, but she also emphasizes the importance of having a great support structure, getting multiple mentors, and keeping options open.

However, her favorite piece of advice comes from her mother.

"Do not let your environment define you," she says. "You might think being from East St. Louis limits who you are, but you have to push back when people are not supportive. Do not be afraid to ask for help. And above all, you define your strengths. You define who you are. Always, always remember that."



Dr. Harris and the Multi-Mission Launcher (MML) system which ARMDEC is organically developing to meet future Integrated Air and Missile Defense needs. The MML program is part of a mobile ground-based weapon system designed to defeat unmanned aircraft systems, cruise missiles, and rockets, artillery, and mortars.