

NEWS

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Simmons University retools media icon's namesake school

Eight years after her death, Gwen Ifill remains a beacon of truth, fairness, and civility

Through her unflinching coverage of seven presidential campaigns, Gwen Ifill shined a bright light of truth, fairness, and civility on a national political landscape increasingly fraught with disinformation, denigration, and disillusionment.

Although she succumbed to cancer at age 61 in November 2016, six days after that year's watershed general election, the barrier-breaking journalist is poised to illuminate many more campaigns in years to come — thanks to the imminent relaunch of a namesake school dedicated to the propagation of her ideals.

The school, which opened six years ago at Boston's Simmons University, Ifill's alma mater, begins the fall semester with a new structure that emphasizes career readiness, a new name that reflects an expanded academic portfolio, and a new leader who intends to take full advantage of the reputational foundation that Ifill built during her celebrated four-decade career.

"Gwen Ifill leaves a transformational legacy, and I am looking forward to working collaboratively to shape a vibrant future for the Ifill School as a communications and liberal arts leader in higher education," said Ammina Kothari, a noted media scholar whom Simmons tapped as dean after a highly competitive national search.

As part of a campuswide overhaul approved late last year by Simmons' board of trustees, the reimagined Gwen Ifill School of Media, Humanities, and Social Sciences will welcome several disciplines previously housed elsewhere in the institution, including political science, sociology, and international relations. (The school's moniker was tweaked to encompass those fields.)

The realignment, which stemmed in part from a desire to expand interdisciplinary learning opportunities and accelerate students' career pathways, also led to the creation of two new academic offerings within the school: an undergraduate major in the humanities and a graduate degree in strategic communications.

Kothari, who assumed leadership of the school on August 1, will guide the rollout of those programs and oversee ongoing efforts to advance instructional innovation (both classroom and co-curricular); faculty and staff development; graduate placement; partnership development; and global engagement.

The Tanzanian-born academician previously directed the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island, where she displayed a keen awareness of higher education's two overarching responsibilities: to prepare students for their place in society and to advance society at large.

Among other things, Kothari, long an advocate of experiential learning, enlisted local media partners to create a broad assortment of internships, practicums, and hands-on research labs. Additionally, working with colleagues across the university, she helped to develop — and launch — a continuing initiative aimed at gauging Rhode Islanders' evolving policy concerns and priorities. The inaugural Rhode Island Survey, released last October, examined attitudes about public education, political-media consumption, and the validity of the electoral process.

Before joining the University of Rhode Island in 2021, Kothari spent a decade on the faculty of the Rochester Institute of Technology, serving as a program director at both the graduate and undergraduate levels and earning RIT's highest honor for outstanding teaching.

As a researcher, Kothari has gained international acclaim for her work on journalistic ethics, standards, and practices and for her data-driven analyses examining the roles that artificial intelligence, automation, and social media play in shaping electoral politics, public policymaking, and societal cohesion.

One upshot is clear: The social and economic uncertainty produced by technological disruption presents today's postsecondary students with unprecedented challenges — and, potentially, once-unimaginable opportunities.

Picking up the torch



Media scholar Ammina Kothari (right) will oversee a relaunch of the multidisciplinary school that Boston's Simmons University opened six years ago to perpetuate alumna Gwen Ifill's legacy. The Tanzanian-born academician, who holds degrees from Indiana University, the University of Oregon, and Illinois' North Central College, has written extensively about press freedom in the developing world and about the societal ramifications of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.

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“Simmons gave me the opportunity to be a leader, to take charge and express myself” — Gwen Ifill



Simmons University



After graduating from Simmons University in 1977, Gwen Ifill became one of America's most respected journalists. Over a career spanning nearly four decades, she lent her talents to a number of leading news organizations, including the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NBC, and PBS. She was the first Black woman to host a nationally televised public-affairs show (*Washington Week in Review*) and part of the first all-female team to anchor a daily national news broadcast (*PBS NewsHour*). A display chronicling her storied career (left) lines a corridor in the Gwen Ifill School of Media, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

Kothari maintains that Simmons' students are fortunate in that they can look to Gwen Ifill as a lodestar. In a political in characterized by mistrust, polarization, and intolerance, she said, the attributes that defined the famed journalist — an unwavering commitment to accuracy and objectivity, a nuanced understanding of social and historical context, and a compassion-based appreciation of policymaking's real-world implications — have never been more important.

“During this period of rapid technological innovation and disruption in society, students must be able to think critically, work in an interdisciplinary fashion, and engage in research and experiential learning opportunities,” Kothari said. “I am excited to join the Simmons community and to have the opportunity to develop and advance undergraduate and graduate programming that will allow our students to thrive.”

The selection process that led to Kothari's appointment was aided by Harris Search Associates, a global executive search firm specializing in higher education leadership. Although the firm has placed more than 1,000 senior administrators across multiple continents, the just-concluded Simmons search stood out, said Jeffrey Harris, the firm's founder and managing partner.

“You can't help but feel added pressure when you're charged with finding just the right person to lead a school that celebrates the ideals and accomplishments of a trailblazing national treasure such as Gwen Ifill,” Harris said. “After all, we're talking about someone whose career warranted commemoration on a U.S. postage stamp.”

The pressure was no doubt amplified by the makeup of the search committee that worked alongside the firm. Simmons President Lynn Perry Wooten and Ifill School Interim Dean Diane Grossman co-chaired the committee, and its 15-member roster featured Gwen Ifill's brother Roberto “Bert” Ifill, a distinguished academic economist and university administrator who has served on Simmons' board of trustees since 2021.

“It's not often you can say, ‘I wonder what the school's namesake would do or want in such-and-such a situation’ — and get an answer grounded in firsthand knowledge,” Harris said. “Throughout the search process, we had the distinct privilege and responsibility of viewing Gwen Ifill not only as a cultural and journalistic icon but also as a real human being — as a once-young Black woman, the daughter of Caribbean immigrants, who refused to cower in the face of racism and chauvinism.

“That really put everything into perspective.”

With a visionary new leader in place and meaningful new degree programs set to debut, Harris said he's certain that the reimagined Gwen Ifill School of Media, Humanities, and Social Sciences will continue to produce the actionable research, the justice-centered thought leadership, and the well-rounded, well-grounded graduates that society so desperately needs.

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NOTE: Ammina Kothari is available for interviews. Possible topics: media coverage of the 2024 election; the state of public-affairs journalism; the value of televised candidate debates; the relevance of the humanities in a STEM-centric world; the impact of emerging technologies on civic and political engagement; and, of course, Gwen Ifill's enduring legacy: WWGD — *What Would Gwen Do?* — in today's highly charged political climate? Kothari can be reached at ammina.kothari@simmons.edu.