



Spring 3-2-2016

## Two-Time Alumna Champions Disabilities Advocacy Work at The White House

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### Recommended Citation

Winthrop University, "Two-Time Alumna Champions Disabilities Advocacy Work at The White House" (2016). *Winthrop News 2016*. 65.

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# Two-Time Alumna Champions Disabilities Advocacy Work at The White House

## Quick Facts

- Thompson was diagnosed at birth with Osteogenesis Imperfecta, a condition that causes the bones to be very brittle and easily fracture.
- She was invited to a special event at The White House honoring the contributions of African-Americans with disabilities to black history.



Thompson with with Miss Wheelchair USA 2014-2015 Yvette Pegues



WASHINGTON, D.C. — When Winthrop University alumna **Vilissa Thompson '08, '12**, started her blog **Ramp Your Voice** in 2013, she set out on an important mission.

“I wanted to build up my blog as a service organization, to where I can use my experience and knowledge as a social worker and a person with disabilities to educate professionals and lay people about people with disabilities, especially women of color with disabilities,” said Thompson, a native of Winnsboro, South Carolina.

Thompson was diagnosed at birth with a brittle bone condition known as **Osteogenesis Imperfecta**. The rare condition causes the bones to not make enough collagen, which makes the bones especially fragile and susceptible to fractures. While she can walk, she often uses a wheelchair to get around.

Washington, D.C., has officially taken notice. Thanks to her tireless work on Ramp Your Voice and with various disabilities non-profits, The White House’s Office of Public Engagement invited Thompson to a special event last week honoring the contributions of African Americans with disabilities to black history.

Days after receiving the invitation, Thompson boarded a train bound for Baltimore. Family members in Baltimore drove her to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, where she met people with disabilities from across the United States.

previously met him in 2008 when he visited Winthrop on the campaign trail—she did have a fun run-in with **Sonny and Bo**, the “First Dogs” of Obama and his family.

“Bo wasn’t very into meeting people, but Sunny was very friendly,” Thompson laughed.

At the event, Thompson listened to disabilities advocacy speakers, which included discussions on identifying as both a person with disabilities and as an African American. The talk compared the Civil Rights Movement with the current disabilities movement. Representatives from official government offices, such as the Justice Department and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, shared their offices’ efforts to benefit people with disabilities. She and attendees also enjoyed a performance by “The Voice” contestant Blessing Offor.

Thompson was particularly excited when Keri Gray, the youth transitions fellow for the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL), recognized Thompson and her blog.

“I was like, ‘Wait, you know who I am?’” Thompson said. “I’m really glad I went. It was very empowering to be in that group and see people of different shapes, sizes and colors.”

### ‘Your Voice Matters’

Thompson earned a degree in psychology from Winthrop in 2008, but it was her **master's degree in social work** that pointed her down the advocacy path.

She served as a board member for the non-profit group **The Arc of South Carolina**, an organization that advocates for people with intellectual and development disabilities. Her work opened the door for her to serve on the diversity committee for the National Arc.

Additionally, Thompson volunteers for the Fairfield County branch of the American Red Cross, writes for a national wheelchair van company's site and guest blogs for disability advocacy organizations at request. She also serves as secretary for and manages the website of the Fairfield County Democratic Party.

She won’t let anything stand in her way, saying there will always be obstacles in life, but that they’re not your fault.

“They’re usually systemic or barriers, something like you can’t get into a building, or people discriminate against you,” she said. “At the same time I’ve had to work beyond that and not allow those misperceptions of me define who I am--to know that I am worthy, I am important, my dreams are just as important as anyone else’s ,and my disability doesn’t define the life that I want to make.

“A disability is not shameful or ugly. It makes you unique. Have confidence in who you are. Your voice matters.”

For more information on Thompson and disabilities issues, visit her **Ramp Your Voice blog**. Interested in talking with her? Call Nicole Chisari, communications coordinator, at 803/323-2236 or email her at [chisarin@winthrop.edu](mailto:chisarin@winthrop.edu).

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