

Before Cynthia “Cynt” Marshall became a woman whose decisions affected an NBA franchise, she was a teenager returning to school with a brace on her nose. Her father had broken it during a period of violence in the family. She continued participating in school activities, including cheerleading, but the adults around her recognized that achievement and enthusiasm did not mean everything was right at home. Three teachers and a principal became especially important in helping her family and encouraging her future. Decades later, when she had earned executive titles and national recognition, she continued giving those educators credit. That detail deserves a place near the beginning of her story because it explains something essential about the way she understands success: she remembers the people who intervened before there was anything prestigious about helping her. They were responding to a child who needed attention, protection, and opportunity. The woman who eventually became known for making employees feel valued had first experienced the difference an attentive adult could make. Marshall has described those educators’ role in her life.

She was born Cynthia Smith in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1959, into a world where segregation still shaped ordinary life. Segregation was the enforced separation of people by race, supported by laws and practices that denied Black Americans equal access to schools, housing, employment, and public accommodations. Her family moved to California when she was three months old and settled in Richmond, in the San Francisco Bay Area. Their move belonged to the larger history of the Great Migration, the movement of millions of Black Americans out of the South in search of greater safety and opportunity. This makes her eventual success part of a story that began before she could make a decision for herself. Her mother wanted her children to grow up with possibilities that the segregated South restricted. Moving could not guarantee that those children would be treated fairly everywhere they went, but it expressed a determination to widen their world. Marshall has connected her origins to that history, remembering that her mother’s church ties reached into Birmingham’s civil rights struggle. Berkeley’s profile places her family’s journey in that setting.

The family lived in Richmond’s Easter Hill public housing development. Public housing provides homes with government support for people whose incomes make other housing difficult to afford, and Marshall’s recollections make clear that limited money existed alongside community, activity, and ambition. Her mother, Carolyn Gardner, insisted on education and faith as daily foundations. Marshall often explains that upbringing through the image of a mathematics book in one hand and a Bible in the other. Mathematics demanded attention, practice, and the willingness to work through a problem until the answer made sense. Her Christian upbringing gave her a language for hope and responsibility that remained with her into adulthood. Those influences help explain why she later became comfortable discussing both financial results and the treatment of people. She could value a compassionate workplace while still expecting the numbers to be correct. Her childhood also included frightening incidents involving her father, including witnessing a shooting at eleven. In her own telling, school became a refuge she

was determined to keep attending, and her mother arranged help so she could get there safely. She recounts these experiences in this extended interview.

There is a danger in rushing through a childhood like hers and calling the resulting adult “strong,” because the word can conceal the work other people performed and the protection a child should have received in the first place. Her accomplishments do not make the violence acceptable, necessary, or beneficial. What deserves appreciation is the network of care that helped her continue developing despite it. A teacher who notices an injury, a mother who keeps insisting on school, and an adult who finds a safe route to class are participating in a child’s future long before anyone can predict the outcome. Marshall’s gratitude makes that participation visible. It also gives substance to a principle that can otherwise sound sentimental: children need people who can see ability without overlooking distress. A gifted student can still be frightened, and a student who smiles can still need help. Supporting that child means making room for both realities, allowing talent to grow while taking the circumstances surrounding it seriously.

At John F. Kennedy High School, she became involved in student leadership and served as senior class president. By the time she entered the University of California, Berkeley, she had earned a full scholarship and had experience accepting responsibility among her peers. College represented a significant expansion of her world, even though Berkeley was geographically close to Richmond. A university brings unfamiliar expectations, new relationships, and opportunities that a student must learn to navigate. For someone whose family has limited financial resources, a scholarship can remove a major barrier, but the student still must complete the reading, prepare for examinations, ask for help, and use the opportunity well. Marshall graduated in 1981. The years between arrival and graduation mattered because they turned promise into preparation. She was building the knowledge and habits that would allow an employer to entrust her with real work, while learning to function in an institution far larger than the school community she had known.

Her participation in Berkeley’s campus life also made her visible in places where Black women had been scarce. She became one of the university’s first Black cheerleaders and the first Black member of its Delta Gamma chapter. A sorority is a membership organization for college women, often involving shared activities, service, and lasting relationships; a chapter is the organization’s group at a particular school. These distinctions are worth understanding accurately because they concern specific barriers she crossed, rather than a vague claim that she was first everywhere. Cheerleading required preparation, coordination, confidence, and the ability to engage a crowd, qualities that would remain recognizable in her public presence. Yet appearing before an audience also meant being exposed to its reactions. Her college experience included the challenge of occupying space where some people were unaccustomed to seeing someone who looked like her. She continued participating, allowing her education to include belonging, leadership, and relationships as well as coursework.

When she considered employment after graduation, Marshall wanted a position that would pay well and allow her to supervise people. The desire for income had a direct family purpose: financial security could change what was possible for her mother and household. She entered Pacific Telephone and Telegraph, part of the corporate history that eventually became today's AT&T, in 1981. Her early assignment involved supervising telephone operators, workers who helped customers complete calls in an era when more of that process required human assistance. It is useful to picture the responsibility correctly. She was a young graduate arriving among workers who already understood their jobs, their schedules, their customers, and the difficulties of the workplace. A supervisory title gave her authority, but it did not automatically give her their knowledge or trust. Her willingness to learn from them became an early source of strength. She could take responsibility for the group while acknowledging that its experienced members had something essential to teach her.

Across thirty-six years, her telephone-company career extended through technical work, recruiting, management, and executive leadership. In a later conversation at Berkeley, she described fifteen jobs across three states and six business units. A business unit is a part of a larger company responsible for a particular area of work, so moving among them can require learning different customers, processes, and priorities. She did more than remain employed for a long time; she acquired a broader understanding of the enterprise. Recruiting taught her about identifying talent, technical assignments helped her understand the service being delivered, and management required her to coordinate people with different responsibilities. This range helps explain how she eventually became qualified for work outside telecommunications, the industry concerned with transmitting information through systems such as telephone and data networks. Her experience had taught her to enter unfamiliar settings, ask useful questions, and connect the work of one department to the needs of another. Her 2026 Berkeley conversation describes that progression.

One of the clearest examples of her approach occurred when she oversaw departments that included telephone repair crews. She learned that their workers attended pole-climbing school and decided to attend herself. Someone at her management level ordinarily would not do that training, but she wanted to understand what the people under her responsibility actually experienced. She completed the work, including climbing a pole more than thirty feet high. The significance lies in the distance she was willing to close between an executive's understanding and a worker's reality. From an office, a repair can look like a task on a schedule; from a pole, it involves physical effort, equipment, procedure, and judgment. An informed supervisor can make better decisions about expectations and resources because the work has become concrete. Her account also describes the respect this earned from technicians and union representatives, people whose role included representing workers' interests. They could see that she had made an effort to understand before speaking on their behalf. The episode appears in an excerpt from her memoir.

Her early years also included lessons about the pressure to fit into corporate America. During her first week, a superior objected to her braids and red shoes, and Marshall complied by changing her appearance. She later explained that, at twenty-one, she believed she was receiving guidance that would help her succeed. That is an important part of the experience: discrimination does not always arrive in language that openly announces hostility. It can be presented as advice about being appropriate, polished, or ready for advancement. The person receiving it may be grateful at first, particularly when she is young and depends on the job. Over time, however, Marshall became more willing to examine whether such advice actually concerned her performance. A hairstyle did not determine whether she could understand an assignment, lead a department, or treat a customer properly. Her growing ability to separate useful coaching from demands to alter her identity became part of her professional maturity.

Around nineteen years later, she faced a more consequential version of that choice. She was offered a position as a corporate officer, a senior executive entrusted with substantial organizational responsibility, but the offer came with instructions to change her appearance, demeanor, and even the name she used. She was expected to become Cynthia instead of Cynt and to adjust expressions that reflected her faith. She declined under those conditions. The company's top leader then contacted her, affirmed that she had been selected as the person she already was, and offered the position without those demands. She accepted. Her account of the promotion explains that turning point. The achievement involved more than receiving a better title: she had reached a point where advancement had to remain compatible with self-respect. She already had a career, financial responsibilities, and a record of results. Her decision reflected an assessment of what the promotion would require and what she was prepared to protect.

That experience gives practical meaning to authenticity, a word often used so loosely that it becomes almost useless. In this setting, authenticity means being able to work with integrity without concealing harmless and meaningful parts of oneself to satisfy someone else's discomfort. It does not remove the need for judgment, preparation, courtesy, or correction when a person makes a mistake. A workplace can reasonably expect dependable performance and respectful conduct. The problem begins when expectations about competence become tangled with assumptions about race, gender, speech, appearance, or personality. Marshall's example helps us examine that distinction. A person can learn to communicate more clearly without surrendering her name, and she can become a better manager without erasing the community that shaped her. For a Black woman navigating environments where leadership has often been pictured in someone else's image, recognizing that boundary can be a significant achievement in itself.

Her eventual positions included president of AT&T North Carolina and senior vice president of human resources and chief diversity officer. Human resources concerns the systems through which an employer hires, develops, supports, evaluates, and holds employees accountable. Diversity refers to the range of people and experiences represented, while inclusion concerns whether those people have meaningful access to

participation and opportunity. These responsibilities required practical work: developing leaders, examining employee feedback, and helping a large organization improve the way it operated. Her team contributed to AT&T reaching Fortune's list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For in 2017. She also became the first African American chair of the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce, an organization representing business interests. Her professional biography records these responsibilities. They show why reducing her career to being encouraging or personable would miss much of her expertise. She was responsible for turning intentions about people into decisions, processes, and expectations inside a major company.

While that career developed, her marriage to Kenneth Marshall carried experiences that belonged to an entirely different measure of life. They had known each other before her professional success, and their family story included repeated pregnancy losses and the death of their daughter, Karolyn, whom they called Special K. Marshall has explained that Karolyn was born approximately four months prematurely and lived for roughly six months. In a public interview, she described being so overwhelmed after the funeral that she remained on the staircase at home until her husband returned and helped her up. She shared that memory with PBS. It is a painful detail because it interrupts any easy assumption that a capable person can organize her way through every experience. She could hold responsibility at work and still be brought to a point where another person's hand was needed. Her willingness to describe that moment gives grief its proper place in the life of someone often introduced through accomplishments.

There is also something to learn about partnership in the way she remembers Kenneth's presence. A long marriage exists in repeated acts of care, including moments when one person has little energy to offer the other. The public record cannot tell us every private difficulty or conversation between them, and there is no need to invent those things to appreciate what she has chosen to share. Her recollection shows a husband responding to the person before him, helping her begin moving again when sorrow had become overwhelming. That memory has influenced the way she talks about helping others. It gives her language about support a physical meaning: someone noticed, came close, and offered assistance. Allowing another person to help is also part of the story. A woman accustomed to responsibility did not become less worthy when she could not carry that moment alone.

Cynt and Kenneth eventually built their family through the adoption of four children. Adoption creates a permanent parent-child relationship, and their children came to them through foster care, a system that arranges care when children cannot safely remain with their parents. The distinction matters because children entering a new family bring their own histories, relationships, needs, and feelings. Their lives do not begin at the moment an adult decides to adopt them. Marshall's public advocacy reflects her commitment to those children and to the larger responsibility of supporting young people in care. She and Kenneth discussed building their family with WFAA. Their parenthood also deserves to stand on its own, with the ordinary and demanding work that raising children involves. Welcoming four children did not erase Karolyn or the losses that preceded them. It

expanded the family's story, giving them relationships that required attention, consistency, and Love over many years.

In December 2010, another major disruption arrived: Marshall was diagnosed with stage III colon cancer. The colon is the main portion of the large intestine, and stage III indicates that the disease has reached nearby lymph nodes, structures involved in the body's immune defenses. Her diagnosis led to surgery and chemotherapy, treatment using medicines to kill cancer cells or interfere with their growth. She was an executive with a family and considerable responsibility, but none of those achievements could make the diagnosis less frightening. In a later interview, she acknowledged the shock and doubt that accompanied hearing the news. Her mother responded with strong religious conviction, and Marshall drew heavily on that encouragement as she underwent treatment. Her discussion with Nido Qubein describes the uncertainty and support surrounding that period. Her faith helped her face the medical work ahead, and receiving treatment remained an essential part of what she did.

Her recovery should be understood with care because stories about illness can unintentionally suggest that survival proves someone possessed more determination or belief than another patient. Marshall's account explains how she found courage; it does not establish a formula that controls medical outcomes. Her experience included professional care, family involvement, friendship, and the beliefs through which she made sense of suffering. She eventually became able to speak about cancer as a survivor and to use her visibility to encourage others. In her interviews, she repeatedly connects faith with the people who showed up in her life. That connection keeps the story grounded in actions: attending appointments, accepting treatment, receiving help, and continuing through difficult days. Her conviction mattered to her because it gave her a way to keep participating in her own care when certainty was unavailable. It also became part of the perspective she later offered to audiences who knew her primarily as a successful executive.

During treatment, she kept journals that eventually helped form her memoir, *You've Been Chosen: Thriving Through the Unexpected*, published in 2022. A memoir is an account in which a person reflects on experiences from her own life, bringing the reader close to how she remembers and understands them. Marshall initially intended to concentrate on her cancer journey, but conversations about the manuscript encouraged her to include more of her childhood, motherhood, and working life. Her interview with Dallas Weekly explains that development. The resulting book gives readers access to experiences that an official biography cannot adequately hold. The title expresses her religious understanding of purpose and responsibility, including the belief that she can use what she has lived through to help someone else. Writing also required her to return to difficult memories and decide what to make public. That choice matters because the polished image of an executive rarely reveals the full history of the person carrying the title.

After retiring from AT&T in 2017, she founded Marshalling Resources, a consulting firm focused on leadership and workplace improvement. Consulting involves bringing specialized experience to help another organization solve problems, make decisions, or strengthen its operations. It allowed her to apply what she had learned across a long career to employers beyond her former company. Her firm's account includes work with Dow on developing a more inclusive workplace, showing that she had begun building a business of her own before the NBA entered the picture. Marshalling Resources describes that work. This part of her life is easy to overlook when the Mavericks appointment becomes the central headline. She had already completed one substantial career and was establishing another professional direction. Accepting the Dallas position therefore meant choosing to interrupt a path she had created, with a clear understanding that the new assignment would require considerable effort and public responsibility.

The Mavericks contacted her in 2018 after reporting exposed sexual harassment and misconduct in the organization's business operations. Mark Cuban needed leadership capable of responding to a serious workplace crisis, and Marshall was introduced that February. She became the first Black woman to serve as chief executive officer of an NBA team. A CEO directs an organization at its highest management level, and her responsibilities centered on the franchise's business operation. The Associated Press places her appointment within that crisis. The history of the appointment is more meaningful when its difficulty remains visible. She was entering a workplace where employees had reasons to question whether leadership would protect them and whether complaints would produce action. Public attention could bring pressure to announce rapid improvement, but the people inside needed changes they could experience. The position required judgment about personnel, standards, communication, and trust, all under scrutiny.

Marshall did not present herself as already knowing every part of the basketball business. She acknowledged that she had to learn the industry and rely on people with experience in it. That honesty is a significant part of her competence. A person who understands leadership still must learn how a particular enterprise earns money, serves customers, handles obligations, and measures performance. In her case, that meant learning the business surrounding the games while drawing on years of experience leading organizations. She explained that learning process to TIME. The move demonstrates how expertise can travel without making knowledge universal. She brought methods for understanding problems and organizing people, then acquired the information needed to use those methods in a new setting. For anyone considering a change later in life, her example gives a realistic form of encouragement: accumulated experience can open a different path when it is accompanied by humility and a willingness to study.

A professional basketball franchise contains far more work than the audience sees on the court. Employees sell tickets, maintain relationships with sponsors, communicate with fans, organize events, and coordinate business activities that make games financially and operationally possible. A sponsor is a company that provides money or

other support in exchange for promotional benefits, such as having its name associated with a team or event. Those relationships depend on trust in the organization as well as enthusiasm for the sport. A damaged workplace can affect the people delivering every part of that experience. When employees fear reporting problems or believe misconduct will be tolerated, management loses reliable information and workers bear the consequences. Marshall's assignment therefore connected the treatment of employees to the functioning of the business. The quality of a game-night experience rests partly on people whose names never appear in the box score, the statistical record of what happened during the game.

Her response included a 100-day plan and a defined set of values: character, respect, authenticity, fairness, teamwork, and safety. She and her colleagues changed leadership representation, conducted training, and met individually with employees. Marshall emphasized that the work involved the organization's people collectively and resisted being credited as if she had transformed everything alone. Her interview with the National Business Officers Association describes those steps. A plan with a deadline can give people a clear starting point and make it possible to track whether commitments are being carried out. It cannot, by itself, guarantee lasting trust. That must develop through repeated experience: an employee raises a concern and receives a serious response; a manager sees that expectations apply to influential colleagues; a new hire discovers that the values discussed during recruitment also shape the workday. The meaning of the plan lay in establishing practices that could continue beyond its initial period.

One practical question in any workplace is whether employees can tell the truth without expecting punishment for making leadership uncomfortable. Emotional safety means that people can raise concerns, ask questions, and acknowledge mistakes without humiliation or retaliation. It still allows managers to evaluate performance, correct errors, and make difficult decisions. Marshall's emphasis on safety belonged to an organization where that distinction was especially consequential. A respectful workplace must be able to address harmful conduct, including conduct by someone who produces impressive business results. Otherwise, its standards depend on who violates them. The broader lesson of her approach is that compassion and accountability have to operate together. Employees need support, but they also need confidence that the person creating harm will face a response. Warm language becomes credible when it is accompanied by consistent decisions, especially when those decisions are inconvenient for powerful people.

Her often-repeated leadership principles are to listen to people, learn from them, and Love them as people. The last part can sound unusual in a business setting, where employees are frequently discussed through productivity, staffing levels, or costs. In practice, her description concerns knowing something about the human being who comes to work: the person's hopes, responsibilities, family, and desired future. She has taught these principles to students as well as executives. High Point University's account of her teaching describes that emphasis. Such attention can improve a leader's understanding of what employees need, but it also carries an ethical responsibility.

Knowing someone's personal circumstances should help a manager treat that person thoughtfully, while respecting boundaries and privacy. Marshall's philosophy invites leaders to remember that employment occupies part of a life. The employee leaves the building and continues being a parent, caregiver, student, neighbor, or person facing a private difficulty.

Her business responsibilities also produced work beyond the initial cultural turnaround. During her tenure, she helped launch a television arrangement that expanded free access to Mavericks games to approximately ten million Texans, and she oversaw roughly \$30 million in upgrades to the American Airlines Center. Andscape's account of her departure records those projects. These details matter because they show her dealing with the commercial and practical responsibilities of a sports franchise. Distribution determines how an audience can watch; arena improvements affect the setting in which customers experience the event. Each involves money, planning, coordination, and relationships with other organizations. Her career deserves to be understood through that full range of responsibility. The person encouraging employees also had to contribute to decisions about the infrastructure, access, and business arrangements supporting the team's future.

Her place in Black history becomes clearer when we consider the difference between being visible in an industry and having authority within it. Basketball has made generations of Black athletic excellence internationally recognizable. Marshall's appointment added a prominent example of Black female leadership in the business that surrounds the sport. It gave students another way to imagine participating: through finance, management, communication, human resources, or other forms of expertise. Her distinction also exposes the long delay contained in the word "first." An organization can exist for decades before a particular group gains access to one of its most senior positions, even though ability has never been confined to those previously selected. The pride in her achievement comes from recognizing her preparation, her judgment, and the work she performed after arriving. A historic appointment becomes more substantial when it expands what others can reasonably expect to attempt and changes the experience of people already inside the institution.

She retired as Mavericks CEO on December 31, 2024, with a consulting arrangement announced through December 2025. Her original three-year commitment had grown into nearly seven years. In her farewell, she expressed gratitude for how the organization and its people had changed her as well as for what they had accomplished together. Reuters reported the transition and her reflections. The decision also belongs to the life story: a person can complete a demanding responsibility and choose a different use for the years ahead. Her subsequent work has included consulting, speaking, and service on corporate and nonprofit boards. A board helps oversee an organization's direction and holds its leadership accountable, allowing experienced members to contribute without managing every daily operation. Her public biography also identifies her as a volunteer advocate for children in protective care, extending a longstanding commitment to young

people whose needs require adults to pay attention. Her current biography describes those responsibilities.

What remains striking across these experiences is how often she returns to the relationship between receiving help and offering it. The educators who saw a child in difficulty, the coworkers who taught a young supervisor, the husband who reached for her in grief, and the people who supported her through treatment all remain part of how she explains her life. Her achievements required her own discipline and ability, and acknowledging those relationships makes the account more truthful. Black excellence can be appreciated in that fullness: the preparation, the intelligence, the refusal to accept demeaning expectations, and the willingness to use authority responsibly. Marshall's history also leaves room for laughter, attachment, vulnerability, and the pleasure she takes in encouraging people. A woman does not have to become emotionally unreachable to be capable of carrying serious responsibility. She can remember what it felt like to need someone and allow that memory to inform how she treats the next person standing before her.