

A portrait of Col. (Ret.) Gail Benjamin Colvin, a Black woman with short, curly dark hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark blue turtleneck sweater with a small, light-colored button at the collar. The background is a blurred interior space with bookshelves filled with books.

COL. (RET.) GAIL BENJAMIN COLVIN

CLASS OF 1980

Col. (Ret.) Gail Benjamin Colvin '80 had no intention of joining the military. But after running out of money two years into her undergraduate education at Vassar College in New York, Colvin looked for other opportunities to complete her degree.

The timing turned out perfectly. President Gerald Ford had recently signed Public Law 94-106, allowing women to enter service academies. Her brother, Col. (Ret.) Philip Benjamin II '75, was assigned as a USAFA admissions adviser in the Minority Affairs Division. He convinced his younger sister that an Academy education made financial sense and would offer her numerous career opportunities.

The New York City native joined USAFA's first co-ed class — the Class of 1980 — and was among the

first 97 women to graduate from the institution four years later. She was one of three African American women to graduate with that class.

"When I think about the '80s Ladies, which is what people call us, I consider them the jewels in my jewel box," Colvin reflects. "They are amazing women."

Being among the first female graduates certainly had its challenges. Colvin says many male cadets and permanent party were accepting of the new recruits, but some were not.

"Some people just did not appreciate my human packaging — whether it was the color of my skin or the fact that I was female," she states. "For some, my existence at USAFA was problematic and there were times of friction." ►

Those challenging experiences never caused Colvin to quit. She persevered and successfully completed the rigorous training and academics.

Since graduation, Colvin completed a 30-year Air Force career and is now in her 10th year of federal civil service as director of staff at her alma mater.

Her service and devotion to the Academy, Air Force and her community — guided by the Air Force core values of integrity, service and excellence — led to her selection as a 2020 USAFA Distinguished Graduate. She's the first African American woman to be so honored.

"When I found out I was selected a Distinguished Graduate, I was speechless, very humbled," she says. "What an honor. But I think I do what all grads do — you do what's asked of you in the moment, and you try to leave things better than you found them."

EYE-OPENER

With two years of college under her belt, Colvin was ready for an easy transition as a "transfer student" to USAFA.

"As I approached the Academy that first day, I saw all these people being yelled at," she recalls. "I thought, 'Boy, I'm so glad I'm a transfer student.' I figured I was going to be a junior, so I wasn't with those people."

When she stepped out of the car, Colvin immediately faced a group of intimidating upperclassmen. She quickly sought out an officer standing nearby to explain her special situation.

"I find an adult and try to explain to him who I am," she recalls. "I'm a transfer student, I have my transcripts with me, yet everyone is confused."

The major laughed and directed her back into line.

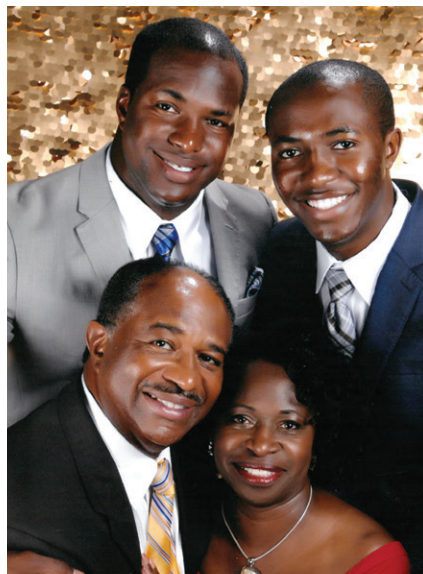
"I spent the rest of that day wondering how I could have misunderstood my recruiter brother," she says. "Surely I would remember being told that I would have to start over and do four more years. At that point I was really thinking about how I could leave."

The next shock comes at the hair cutting station. Colvin had studied Air Force regulations for women — so she had straightened her afro and pulled her hair back — and thought she was good to go.

"However, they spritzed water on my chemically treated hair, and it reverted back



TOP: Cadet Gail Benjamin receives her USAFA diploma in 1980.



MIDDLE: Col. (Ret.) Gail and Lt. Col. (Ret.) "Doc" Colvin with their children, James III (left) and Jordan.



BOTTOM LEFT: Vaughn (left) and Gail (right) Benjamin, sibling classmates, walk on the Terrazzo with their mother.



BOTTOM RIGHT: Gail Benjamin and her mother on graduation day.

to an afro,” she remembers. “To recover, my hair was cut very short on that first day.”

Despite those early frustrations, Colvin says the decision to attend the Academy was a good one.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Colvin looks back on her cadet days as a huge growth opportunity. Not only were academics and military training challenging and inspiring, but the extracurricular experiences were unmatched.

She points to glider flights, pugil stick battles and basic parachuting as activities that helped shape her.

“Those things weren’t really on my bucket list,” she admits, “but they gave me a sense of confidence in my abilities and taught me to be comfortable being uncomfortable ... that truly is how you grow and develop.”

A surprise was Colvin’s involvement on USAFA’s first women’s track team. She was a sprinter and served as the indoor team captain for four years.

There were few established women’s teams, so many coaches recruited athletes while observing physical fitness tests freshman year.

“You got recruited on the spot,” Colvin recalls. “I ran track competitively in high school but had no intention of competing at USAFA. The women’s track team became one of my main support groups.”

Another growth experience came in the form of an appearance on NBC’s “Today Show” coverage of women attending U.S. service academies.

“I represented USAFA along with women from the other academies,” Colvin says. “I hope I gave a credible perspective on the experience and opportunity, and hopefully encouraged others.”

LIFE LESSONS

Despite previous college experience, Colvin was in for a shock when it came to hectic cadet life. She learned several key lessons that helped her manage her schedule at school and throughout her career. Perhaps the most important lesson was time management.

“At the Academy, there is more to do than you can possibly handle ... by design,” she explains. “You quickly learn how to focus on what’s important and weed other things out.”

Teamwork and team building were key leadership skills Colvin learned at USAFA.

“I CONSIDER MYSELF SO FORTUNATE, SO BLESSED, FOR ALL THE OPPORTUNITIES I’VE HAD. ... I’VE BEEN AT THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME FOR MANY THINGS TO HAPPEN THAT AFFORDED ME OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW, DEVELOP AND GIVE BACK.”

—COL. (RET.) GAIL BENJAMIN COLVIN '80

“You assess your own strengths and realize what you bring to the team,” she asserts. “You’re not going to be good at everything, so you have to collaborate with others and leverage their strengths for a successful outcome.”

Humility was yet another important lesson. Colvin earned distinction on the Dean’s List several semesters. However, she struggled in an engineering course and sought help from her instructor to get back on track.

“You had to learn to appreciate extra instruction (EI). I think the Academy helps you confront some of your limitations and see that you can overcome them with help. EI are my favorite letters in the alphabet,” she smiles.

CAREER JOURNEY

Colvin was not locked-in on a particular career path.

“Completing my college education was a primary driver,” she confesses. What drew her to the military was her belief that if she worked hard, she would be treated fairly and equitably.

“It was a meritocracy,” she explains. “Everyone received equal pay for the same work. That was appealing to me.”

In fact, she often found herself the “first” and only woman of color in many settings and acknowledges that things weren’t always perfect.

Colvin launched her 30-year military career in acquisitions, working in the Ballistic Missile Office at Norton Air Force Base in California as a system safety program manager for the Missile, Experimental (M-X) — later Peacekeeper — program.

Her next assignment was at Rome Air Development Center, New York, overseeing program control of surveillance technology projects. The next career move was to Headquarters Strategic Air Command, Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, where Colvin served as Air Force Space Command’s on-site acquisition manager for construction of NORAD’s alternate command and missile warning center. She was then assigned to Air Force Space Command in Colorado

Springs working Cheyenne Mountain upgrade programs.

From there, Colvin transferred to the 5th Bomb Wing, Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, where she led the wing’s quality improvement programs. She also served as commander, 5th Mission Support Squadron. Then on July 22, 1996, Maj. Colvin assumed command of the 5th Services Squadron from her spouse, Lt. Col. James T. (Doc) Colvin Jr. ’79. This was the first change of command between spouses in the Air Force.

In 1996, Colvin won the Air Combat Command General Curtis E. Lemay Services Award for “Best Services Squadron — Large Base Category”, recognized for providing superior programs to Air Force members and families.

Colvin was later assigned to the Pentagon as deputy chief, Mobility Division, responsible for modernizing the Air Force’s 1,200-aircraft mobility fleet and managing a \$29 billion portfolio.

After attending Air War College, she was assigned to the Joint Staff and served as chief, Joint Doctrine, for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. There she headed the U.S. delegation to NATO’s Allied Joint Doctrine subcommittee and chaired NATO’s Joint Warfighting interoperability subcommittee resolving doctrinal interoperability issues linked to national security. In response to 9/11, she initiated doctrine for Homeland Security and interagency operations to support the presidential Global War on Terrorism.

Next, Colvin became the 49th Mission Support Group commander, Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico, providing base operations support for the F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighter — the first operational aircraft designed around stealth technology — and the German Air Force Training Center.

“Providing support across all base functions and missions allows you to see your contribution daily and understand what it means to take care of the airmen under your charge,” she says.



CLOCKWISE: Col. Gail Colvin served as joint doctrine writer for Gen. Hugh Shelton (pictured) and Gen. Richard Myers during her Air Force career. Gail Benjamin Colvin (left) and James "Doc" Colvin (right) pose for a photo with President Barack Obama. Gail and James Colvin on graduation day for their son James III.



USAFA CALLING

The capstone assignment of Colvin's Air Force career brought her back to USAFA in 2006 as vice commandant for culture and climate and designated ombudsman to the superintendent on sexual assault and organizational climate issues. She admits it was a dream come true to return to USAFA.

Colvin had the opportunity to work initiatives in sexual assault and harassment prevention, mental health, equity, and diversity and inclusion.

"It increased my awareness to ensure that everyone feels included, receives equitable treatment and is valued," she says. "I know that some people associate diversity with lowering standards. But it is really about appreciating, valuing and leveraging everyone's contribution. It's the right thing to do."

Colvin retired from the Air Force in 2010. Since 2011, she has worked under federal civil service as USAFA's director of staff for four superintendents — providing executive advice, institutional knowledge and corporate administration.

"They've all been amazing leaders," she says of the superintendents. "I've learned something from every single one. And I've had a ring-side seat watching them work tirelessly to improve this institution."

An advocate for culturally responsible leadership based on access, equity and inclusion, she created dignity and respect and multicultural councils and expanded cadet counseling services. She was instrumental in the creation of USAFA's strategic diversity plan. She chaired USAFA's 2020 internal review assessing racial disparities in programs, policies and practices, resulting in comprehensive recommendations to ensure an environment where all can flourish.

Among the highlights of her tenure as director of staff are serving as USAFA's director for the 2018 DoD Paralympic Warrior Games, and the airfield renaming in honor of General Benjamin O. Davis Jr. memorializing the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen.

"It is an honor and privilege to give back to my alma mater," she notes.

GOOD NEIGHBORS

Colvin inherited a sense of service from her parents.

"Service to the community is the rent you pay," she recalls her parents saying, "for living on this planet."

With a deep commitment to community, she served on the mayor's Commission for Women in Minot, North Dakota, and the

Trust, Education, Safety, Support, Action (TESSA) board of directors — a domestic violence/sexual assault victim service agency in Colorado Springs. She is a member of the Colorado Federal Executive Board, developing strategies to improve government efficiencies throughout the state. She also is an El Pomar Foundation trustee and member of its Pikes Peak Regional Council and Black Advisory Committee, identifying and resourcing needs statewide in Colorado.

In addition, Colvin is frequently been a guest speaker at conferences and seminars addressing diversity, inclusion and black heritage. Further, her inspiring story of being among the first African American women to attend USAFA is on display at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Her picture and several cadet artifacts are part of the museum's permanent collection.

"When I see the display on service academies and African Americans who have served in the military, I am honored to be a part of the history that highlights the broader contributions and struggles of African Americans in this country," she says.

GRATEFULNESS

Colvin admits she could not have imagined how her career would play out when she showed up at USAFA in 1976. But she is thankful to have had the opportunity to serve the nation and her alma mater all these years.

"I consider myself so fortunate, so blessed, for all the opportunities I've had," she says. "I've been at the right place at the right time for many things to happen that afforded me opportunities to grow, develop and give back."

She recognizes, however, that her career journey would not have been possible without the unfailing support of her husband, Doc, and their children, James '12 and Jordan (Princeton University '20). Extended family members, bosses and co-workers, classmates and the original women air training officers have also played key roles in supporting her career and family.

Colvin also salutes her fellow '80s Ladies who continue to be advisers and friends.

"Nothing have I done alone," she says. "I'm beholden to just so many people." 