



# Ahead *of the* Curve

2019 John H. Taylor Jr. Education Leadership  
Award Winner, Bebe Coker **BY MATT AMIS**

AS A MOTHER, sister, artist, advocate, agitator, mentor and a leader—Beatrice “Bebe” Coker made her mark on Delaware.

A longtime advocate for quality public education, the arts, and diversity, Coker is this year’s recipient of the John H. Taylor Jr. Education Leadership award for providing sustained leadership in advancing Delaware education and making our community a better place to live and work. The honor was handed out by Chamber affiliate, The Partnership, Inc. at May’s Superstars in Education Reception & Awards Ceremony.

The Jacksonville-born Coker—the granddaughter of one of the nation’s first black lawyers—attended segregated schools in Duvall County, Florida before moving to Wilmington in the 1960s.

Throughout the turbulent 60s, Coker worked with the state’s social services division and along with many others, she fought and won the right to change unfair segregated housing laws and gained equal-access public accommodations.

In the decades that followed, she worked peacefully to dismantle school segregation, which persisted in Delaware for 12 years following the Brown v. Board of Education verdict in 1954. She was appointed by former Governor Pierre S. du Pont to join the Citizens Alliance for Public Education to help ensure the peaceful desegregation of schools.

A trailblazer in championing diversity and cultural appreciation, she was also ahead of the curve when it came to vocational education, and the positive impact it can make on African American families. She served on the school board of the fledgling New Castle County Vocational-Technical School District for 12 years, and she

helped pioneer Jobs for Delaware Graduates, an initiative under former Gov. du Pont that gained national accolades.

“From her civil rights activism to her leadership in education, Bebe is a true champion of excellence and equity. Like John Taylor, she is someone I rely on to tell me the way it is, the unvarnished truth,” said Paul Herdman, president and CEO of Rodel, and education advocacy nonprofit.

“As an advocate, she helped open doors to children all across the county. She has led efforts to support literacy in everyone from our babies to our men returning from prison. To this day, she is working with educators and policymakers to elevate the teaching profession. In every role, she brings a fierce commitment to speaking the truth and building our community.”

Now retired, she has also served co-director of the Delaware Black Heritage Educational Theater Group, an organization that collaborates with literacy programs all over the city and county for African American youth, and as chair of the Stagehands of Christina Cultural Arts Center in Wilmington.

She’s collaborated with arts and community groups ranging from the NAACP, the Wilmington Opera House Restoration Project, the Wilmington Black Theater Ensemble, the Black Heritage Theater and Education Group, the Metro Wilmington Urban League, and many more.

“Bebe Coker is the truth,” says longtime friend Raye Jones Avery, director of the Christina Cultural Arts Center. “If you can’t handle the truth you might not want to engage in discourse with Miss Bebe.

“Telling stories of the resilience of African Americans is one of her greatest passions—but the arts and equal access to effective education are key to her mission.” ■