

# Suffolk woman becomes first black Ph.D. graduate at Florida State's College of Medicine

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## PHOTO GALLERY



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TALLAHASSEE, FL. – Many people earn their Ph.D., but not all of them make history.

Suffolk native Lataisia Jones is the first black or African American Ph.D. graduate at the Florida State University College of Medicine. She earned her degree on August 5.

Like every other proud graduate with Internet access, her graduation photo was posted on social media. However, not every post gets more than 6,000 likes or shares.

“I never imagined it to be this big, but I’m glad it is,” Jones said of her accomplishments. “It’s 2017 and still an African American being a first has created such honor and motivation and inspiration. I’m talking to people in Tennessee, or California, or other countries and they’re asking me for tips about biomedical programs, putting up with long hours in the lab and asking what kept me interested and driven. I think it’s wonderful.”

After graduating from King’s Fork High School in 2006, Jones began her academic career at Virginia State University, where she earned her bachelor’s degree in biology. She pursued her master’s degree at VSU and had the opportunity to study abroad and teach kids in Ghana, which she credits with inspiring her to pursue her Ph.D.

“I was teaching kids who got so excited to learn, even if I was just teaching them the smallest thing,” Jones said. “I loved that feeling so much that I realized I wanted to continue doing that. I wanted to teach, study, volunteer and even create study-abroad opportunities for other students.”

During her five years at Florida State, Jones worked under Professor Pradeep Bhide, the Jim and Betty Ann Rodgers Eminent Scholar Chair of Developmental Neuroscience in the Department of Biomedical Sciences. She successfully defended her dissertation on dystonia, a disease causing involuntary muscle contractions, and was awarded her Ph.D. this summer.

“Not only am I the first black graduate,” Jones said of the pressure, “but I was Pradeep’s first grad student, I’m the first Ph.D. in my family, and I don’t have any friends who have a Ph.D.”

Through various outreach programs, Jones continues to teach and connect with kids through science, and she visits elementary schools with predominantly minority students and conducts hands-on experiments to introduce them to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). She is currently working in a lab to finish a project related to her dissertation and plans to pursue faculty and postdoctoral positions that can afford her the opportunity to encourage the next generation of minority neuroscience researchers.

“I think it is very important to have that pipeline created even as early as elementary school,” she said.

As of 2014, only 163 of the 4,923 graduate students in U.S. neurobiology/neuroscience programs were black or African American.