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Suffolk woman is first African American Ph.D. graduate of FSU program

By James Thomas Jr.
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Sep 29, 2017



Courtesy Photo

From left, father Bernard Jones, sister Lateakwa Jones, Lataisia Jones, Ph.D., and mother Paula Tisdale celebrate Lataisia's graduation on Aug. 5.








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Lataisia Jones, a 2006 King's Fork High School graduate, recently completed a personal academic achievement that has made her a role model for many.

Jones became the first African American Ph.D. graduate from the Florida State University College of Medicine, Department of Neuroscience, on Aug. 5. Not only was it a proud achievement for the entire Jones family, but once the news was shared on her sister's Facebook page, it went viral.

"It was like thousands of likes and requests – maybe 10,000 – coming in from around the world," said her sister, Lateakwa Jones, also a King's Fork graduate and Army reservist with a degree in computer science. "It was too overwhelming for me to help; I tried to help."

The task of trying to answer all those posts and inquiries, naturally, defaulted to Lataisia Jones and she's been busy, too.

"I'm talking to people in Tennessee or California and people outside of the country," she said. "Kids in foster systems, those whose parents never went to college, undocumented kids.

"I don't have all the answers, but I try to look for resources to help them or, at least, try to provide some hope."

Jones is not only the first African American Ph.D. graduate at the FSU College of Medicine neuroscience department, but one of only a few in the country. As of 2014, among the 4,923 graduate students in U.S. neurobiology/neuroscience programs, only 163 were black, according to documents from FSU Public Affairs.

"I'm the first Ph.D. in my family," Jones said. "I don't have any friends who have a Ph.D. It's 2017, and still, an African American being a first has created such honor and motivation and inspiration."

Jones's scientific curiosity was sparked in early childhood.

"I remember everyone was kind of challenged by science class, and I took that and made it something competitive for myself," she said. "I told myself it would be amazing if I could understand it.

"I don't believe in fearing anything; I'd rather face them, and that's what I've done through this whole process."

Jones admits there were times of apprehension and self-doubt during her academic journey.

"Things like, 'do I really want to do this and have student loans to pay back for the rest of my life?' " she said. "I didn't know how I got here or if I was even good enough. There were many times when I wanted to give up."

Despite the tough times, Jones also discovered there were many people on all sides of the racial and cultural divides willing to help.

Professor Glenn Harris, her adviser through undergraduate and graduate studies at Virginia State University, got her into a lab internship at the College of William & Mary under professor Dianne Shakes. Harris later spearheaded Jones's foreign studies program in Ghana.

At FSU, professors Richard Nowakowski and Pradeep Bhide reminded her, "We wouldn't let you get to this point unless you were capable and knowledgeable enough to do so."

And her mother, Paula Tisdale of Suffolk, whose descendants are from Ghana, provided nurturing.

"After having had the experience in Ghana – seeing how these kids loved learning – it determined my long-range goals," Lataisia Jones said. "It would require me to have a Ph.D., to mentor and hold study-abroad opportunities for other students."

Jones chose a study of dystonia, a disease causing involuntary muscle contractions, for her doctoral dissertation. Her study examined

underlying reasons for the disease, including patient samples to show its manifestation, she said. Future goals, however, are to specialize in

areas like "Parkinson's or Alzheimers, to see if I can make an impact in those areas."

Jones, 29, took five years to complete her doctoral program, but overall post-graduate work, including lab research, thesis, travel, exams and study, took up most of her 20s and at a social sacrifice.

"I'm not married; I don't have children. I haven't taken summers off. I haven't even watched TV in the past five years," Jones said, adding, however, that she has no regrets and "would definitely do it again."

The FSU College of Medicine is committed to addressing barriers that face minority students who want to pursue research careers, noted Jeffrey Joyce, senior associate dean for research programs, in a media release. Continuing to diversify the program's faculty is also a goal, he said.

"It's important to have people in place who look like me for students up-and-coming," Jones said. "Because although I can go talk to any of my professors, it's different when you're talking to a professor who looks like you, who went through those same things."

Jones is completing a lab project related to her dissertation. Meanwhile, she's seeking employment. She'd like to return home if possible, she said, but will go "where there's opportunity or where I'm needed."

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