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Minority and Friends Network Travel Grant

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Growing up in the Chicago area was very interesting and provided many insights to people and American society in general. As a child, I was very lucky to have parents who built a wonderful home for my brother and me along with grandparents who supported us unconditionally. My philosophy for diversity is simple: meet students or individuals where they are and help challenge them to see other perspectives through me, our conversations, or the obstacles conquered together as a group. As a young black woman going through the educational system, it was hard to ever learn about someone other than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or George Washington Carver in our history lessons outside of the Black History Month program put on once a year. You heard talk about slavery and how Harriet Tubman helped but things never went any further.

I remember visiting family with my grandparents in Mississippi and Arkansas one year and listening to my grandfather tell us grandchildren where he lived and worked at the age of ten. He told stories about slavery and how that phenomenon affected his life. He'd often stop the car and tell us to get out and walk through fields of cotton with him. The lessons about oppression and hope kept coming, and out of nowhere our fingers were bleeding. That's right! My grandfather had each of us pick one stem of cotton to make us reflect on what that felt like for black folk back then; picking tons a day versus us picking one plant and bleeding. Some may think that was overdoing it for a child but for me it was the experience that I needed. My grandfather met me where I was and challenged me through his actions. Throughout my life I have used these lessons as inspirations to accomplish many things, always fascinated learning about human uniqueness and similarities. For example, I'd often want to know what was the difference between Baptist and Catholic; the difference between races, ethnicities, social norms; and how I could help other people see and learn to love what I had learned to love.

I left for college in 2003 knowing that I was the first generation in my family to do so and wanted to make everyone proud, especially my grandparents. In comparison to my family life and early education experiences, my collegiate life was significantly different. For example, I was the usually the only black student (often only student of color) in most classes. If that wasn't enough, Meredith, a Caucasian floor mate, told me that I was the first black person with whom she had ever interacted. Lots of comments like this from classmates reminded me of the relationships portrayed between the black and white students in the movie *Remember the Titans*. Despite our social and cultural differences, I welcomed Meredith's questions and had lots of fun

with her and her family during their visits to campus. As with Meredith, many of the friendships developed during my undergraduate days remain strong today.

As an aspiring professional, I decided to put my voice and spirit out there, to help other students like Meredith meet people from around the world and broaden *our* horizons together. At my undergraduate school I was a mentor, a Resident Assistant, and the first student of color to be named a School of Education Dean's Dozen member. In these many roles, I had long talks about diversity with residents who felt that it was okay not to be aware of other students and cultures because "they were from a small town". I remember residents helping me create bulletin boards celebrating our diversity, not knowing that they would gain meaningful insight from the experience. I became a Safe Zone participant out of my desire to provide the needed social and emotional support for my several residents in my building.

As a NASPA Undergraduate Fellow, I was encouraged to attend Graduate School and pursue a degree in Student Affairs. As members of our CSA cohort we tease each other, intimating that we are all in the same boat since we all got "tricked" and now serve as Associate Resident Directors in the department of Housing and Dining Services here at EIU. Despite the daunting daily task of balancing academics and ARD responsibilities, I challenge my RAs, building residents and cohort peers to watch their words and actions. Together we work diligently to be mindful of our words and actions toward others as we grow and learn to respect our differences and communication styles used within the residence hall and in classes. In general, I think the residents in my building understand and appreciate the 'climate of inclusiveness' encouraged by Denika. As an ARD, I work with a faculty fellow to put on special programs held within my building, such as "Our Great Big Edible World", which challenges each learning community to represent a country for the month, cook a dish, and provide facts about the country. For this program specifically, the McKinney Hall staff creates a "tour" of the world and requires students to answer specific questions before entering each 'country' and enjoying the wonderful food. Each student is provided an American 'passport' to be used as they proceed throughout the world. The great thing about this specific program is the help we receive from faculty members across the campus. This year, our faculty fellows will not only participate but cook a dish from their favorite country as well. Through this program, many of my students are able to become more open not only to other countries but to other students who are

representatives of other countries and cultures. This and similar programs provide a time for students to hear others' stories while creating a more welcoming environment for all.

Professionally, I challenge myself to do better and never stop learning. I have served on the Minority Advisory Committee (MAC) here at EIU and participated in community service projects sponsored by the campus chapter of the National Residence Hall Honorary (NRHH). I served as demonstration of my commitment to continuously help others who are less fortunate than myself. In addition to my participation in MAC and NRHH activities, I also encourage my staff to sponsor monthly community service projects. For example, through AmeriCorps, I volunteered at an elementary school as an afterschool tutor. Currently, this spring I am teaching a course at EIU entitled *Strategies to Success*. The class is comprised of students who are either on academic probation or warning with the institution. Through this course I hear their stories and help each student recognize their differences and the importance of working to achieve the goal of obtaining their baccalaureate degree. Disciplined was the word used when I described myself in my undergraduate Multicultural Education class one semester. Being disciplined helped shape my beliefs and values as a child, especially when I wanted to understand what my grandparents had overcome. Being disciplined pushed me through my high school career and challenged me as an undergraduate. Self-discipline placed me in front of 48 first year residents as a resident assistant. And, self-discipline helped me realize that multicultural awareness was an important aspect within my professional passion.

My life mission is to become the best person that I can be. It is my belief that everyone should have a purpose or goal in life and, with the help of just one person, many may realize them. I want to be that person to not only my family, but also to those who need the direction the most: college students who may struggle with access to educational attainment due to family or background circumstances. I believe that in every situation there is a lesson to be learned. This is why I will put myself on the line as an educator and role model to promote honesty, equality, and acceptance of others to anyone with whom I come in contact. With the development of many types of relationships, I hope to better understand and quickly identify the stages of life and development of each individual student with whom I work. I have had the opportunity to continue my education in a field that I have grown to love: Student Affairs. For the longest time as a student, I was unable to place my passion into a program. In Student Affairs I believe I have finally found the perfect vehicle for it. A career in this field means having opportunities to enjoy,

encourage, and support academic and personal growth within students throughout their journey. Working with students with academic problems to help them succeed in life is one of the passions that keep me motivated. Being the support bridge that students need to connect their academic and personal development into one is a challenge that could be conquered if we all work together.