

Corey Andrew Powell 00:00:23

NSLS Alumina, Jahylin McKee is a multi-faceted communications expert who heads her own agency, J.McKee&Co. Jahylin joined me recently in a discussion about how tenacity and fearlessness helped put her on the right path to career success. I'm Corey Andrew Powell, your host and this is Motivational Mondays.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:00:23

I'm joined by Jahylin McKee. She is the founder and CEO of J.McKee&Co, and it's a boutique publicity PR firm. Jahylin, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Jahylin McKee 00:00:34

Thank you for having me Corey. I'm so happy to be here on this lovely Monday.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:00:38

Yes. Yes. Yes, we're getting through it. We had a little technical difficulty in the beginning, but we are united. Yes, right. It's okay. We got through it. You are a go-getter. That's just the first thing I have to say about you, when I know how hard you've worked and then you have the entrepreneurial spirit. You started your own company, but just to go back a little bit. You are a former graduate of Savannah State University.

Jahylin McKee 00:01:01

Yes. Yes. I am.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:01:02

Many people would go Wow,that's a prestigious HBCU but then I heard on a podcast, you were discussing how you initially had Spelman on your mind when you were first looking.

Jahylin McKee 00:01:17

You did your research!

Corey Andrew Powell 00:01:23

I did. I did my research and so I was really curious to know how that transition happened from the dream of going to Spelman to then, you know, really rockin at Savannah State and just reshaping your future. So tell me a little bit about that.

Jahylin McKee 00:01:30

Yeah, definitely. So basically, my cousin, I had an older cousin who attended Morehouse College back when I was still in high school. And so I got a chance to really experience, you know, outside of watching Drumline and Stomp The Yard, the feeling of actually stepping foot on an HBCU campus, especially during homecoming season, which is one of the huge highlights of attending an HBCU.

I attended Spelman homecoming which is when Morehouse and Spelman College kind of have their homecomings happening at the same time. And I was like, maybe like in the ninth grade and I instantly, I fell in love. I felt like I was at home. I'm like, this is where I need to be. My cousin is already here. This is going to be great. I went and bought a Future Spelmanite shirt, and I intentionally did not apply for that many colleges because I wanted to just go to Spelman.

So fast forward. I was in this program called Upward Bound and so it was kind of like a college readiness program that kind of helps prepare high school students into attending college and making them college bound. So our program was with Georgia State and my Upward Bound instructor had a lot of different connections at all of the schools in Georgia.

So, I actually ended up getting put on the waiting list at Spelman College and I was completely devastated. You know, my mom was like, well, you can just go to Georgia State because you went to Georgia State in high school. Like, you know, you did their dual enrollment program. And I'm like no, I don't want to do that. It's not an HBCU and then time was running out because at this point it was August, and the Upward Bound Director was like, okay, well, you have three other options. You can go to Savannah State. You can go to Albany State or you. Go to Fort Valley and then you can just transfer to Spelman your sophomore year.

I was so devastated. I didn't know nothing about a Savannah State, child — and the only reason why I picked Savannah State out of Fort Valley and Albany State was the fact that they have palm trees.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:03:43

You know, I knew that from that interview. I was like waiting for you to say that because you're like, look, they have palm trees, beaches and sand. So I'm like, all right.

Jahylin McKee 00:03:50

And that's how, you know, the story is truthful because my sentiments are still the same.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:03:58

Why I think that story is so important is because it's an example of being pliable and being flexible, right? When you think you have a predetermined idea..

Corey Andrew Powell 00:04:10

The beautiful thing about it was, I did not even realize that in the moment like Savannah State chose me. I didn't choose Savannah State and that's evident. And literally though when I stepped foot on Savannah State's campus, I fell in love.

Jahylin McKee 00:04:23

It was beyond the palm trees. It was like, literally, I felt like the faculty and staff for my family because I almost did not get housing. And the fact that the woman who was now still my mentor to this day was responsible for getting me housing. And, you know, just really kind of becoming a part of my Village and cultivating me into a student leader. Like, literally for someone who did not want to attend Savannah State, I did everything. I was the queen of the University. I was Miss Savannah State University.

I was a student orientation leader. I was part of a modeling group. I was a part of student government. Literally, like you name it, I did at Savannah State. But you know, Savannah State is home. I will always forever and always rep, my orange and blue. And, you know, I'm just really grateful for just the HBCU experience as a whole.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:05:15

Yeah, I think for me, coming up the whole era was like The Cosby Show and then the spin-off of A Different World, right? So that was a whole like, for me in that time — late teens, early, 20s that show — A Different World, really, really pushed forward the whole idea about HBCUs, I think about of black kids who had not even considered that.

Jahylin McKee 00:05:35

Just like I had my heart set on Spelman, that's all I knew, you know. And I feel like that's why it's so important for students to just get exposed to other HBCUs. It wasn't the fact that I had anything against Savannah State. I just didn't know about it. And so that goes to show you that there are so many other HBCUs and like every HBCU brings a little bit something different.

What attracted me more to Savannah State on top of that was the fact that once I realized I wanted to go into journalism and you know mass communications, Savannah State was the only one out of two universities in the state of Georgia that has an accredited program for that. And the other university is University of Georgia. So it was like UGA or Savannah State. That was something that I was proud of and you know, I even actually had an opportunity to transfer to Spelman my sophomore year and I turned it down.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:06:27

Oh, isn't that something? Again? That's a wonderful lesson for, you know, everything that you think you want in life. If you go out and just experience things, you never know how the road will turn, right? That's amazing. The idea of which I think is a good take away now too for college students... You know, our audience are all young people who are about to, they're either entering college or they're graduating college shortly. So the lesson from that is to definitely explore programs, right?

Or like what schools have, maybe the things you're interested in. And you also mentioned the accreditation, which is a really big deal when it comes to your Academia, to make sure you have credited courses in the field you want to go in and that's a better determining factor for going to college, versus your cousin went there. No offense.

Jahylin McKee 00:07:15

Even at Spelman. I was still trying to make it work. There was no communications degree. The closest thing there was English, that would have been related to me. I think that it is also important to figure out what exactly it is that you want to do because of the college experience — it's great. But you also want to plan for life after graduation because ultimately, you're there to be a student here. You're there to get a degree.

Corey Andrew Powel 00:07:39

You are interested in at that point, journalism, you mentioned, and marketing and media —sort of communications. Is that the area you went into?

Jahylin McKee 00:07:47

Yes, so originally being that I wanted to be an English major at Spelman, I just took over that same major at Savannah State. However, again the village, the people who just became really invested in me as a human being and me as a student, a lot of people were like, I think you will be really great in the Journalism Department. Maybe you should look into it. And so, I did. And when I tell you, like, I fell in love. I literally, I remember like, as a freshman, marching up to the Provost office and I was like, I need an internship. And she's like, girl wait until your junior year. I was like No, I need to know what this is like now.

And so I just fell in love with the art of language. I fell in love with the art of publicity. I had this Adjunct professor who just really changed my outlook. I always knew what I wanted to do, but I couldn't really put it into words and, you know, just journalism mass communications public relations, specifically — just really speaks to who I am as a person as a leader. And I didn't even realize I was even becoming this PR person for my campus.

You know, as Miss Savannah State ultimately, you're a walking brand ambassador and you know, making placements and headlines in Ebony Magazine — that's a form of publicity. So I didn't even realize when I was on Savannah State's campus, I was already becoming this person who I knew I was going to be after graduation. I just needed to get the formal training. I needed the formal terminology and just take that and run with it.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:09:21

That's important too because one of the great things about this podcast is that I get to talk to people who do different sorts of jobs and different career paths and the idea of communication and someone who is a language specialist in PR, that is a career that many people might not have considered. And I love how you just described that because you and I are very aligned with that; communication. I love the written word. Very often people come to me for personal projects to help them sort of convey to the public what they want to say and it's a powerful skill when you discover, you can do it. You help people communicate, it's a big deal. It's a big deal.

Jahylin McKee 00:09:56

That's a huge responsibility. People don't realize that PR is one of the most stressful jobs in the whole entire world. It's like number five on the list. It's like next to being a police officer. Next to being a surgeon — you have a publicist.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:10:11

Right? Right. Well, you know, it's funny. I know you have it in your tagline, "continuing Olivia Pope's work." I believe is what the tagline said in your bio — "Continuing Olivia Pope's Legacy in real life.

Jahylin McKee 00:10:18

So fair enough, again, full circle moment. It was like I think right around the time actually I got inducted into The National Society of leadership and success — I actually, this is when I made the decision to run for Miss Savannah State. I was getting all these accolades. I was sitting in the front row at the Honors Convocation. I just got inducted into the National Society of Leadership and Success — and literally, Olivia Pope was like. First off, Scandal the show Scandal that Olivia Pope was a character on was all I watched in college.

If you even had time to watch TV kudos to you, but like I made it my business because I just felt so connected to the character and I'm like, maybe this is an idea of what I want to do. So like I literally I watched the show. I fell in love with, you know, Kerry Washington and I said, I'm going to make this the theme for when I run for Miss Savannah State. And I'm going to treat — a lot of people don't know this but I treated my campaign to be Miss Savannah State as a real publicity campaign.

And I wanted to see if I was even capable of pursuing this as a career and honestly, that was my goal and I made a bet with myself and I said, if I win, I'm gonna be a publicist if I'm not gonna win — I'm gonna try to do something else.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:11:39

Wow, so you went out and really like campaigned, like it was in real time, that you were on a promotional campaign to win this title... And you won that title... And then you became a publicist! Now, many people don't realize too, well I guess they do now, but the fact that at the time they didn't really know that Judy Smith was the actual publicist who is behind the Olivia Pope character. So many people didn't know that at first, but she is a prominent — she's an African-American woman.

Jahylin McKee 00:12:10

Very much a real person.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:12:10

Yeah, she's real — but I love how she has to clarify that she did not have an affair with George Bush though. I love her clarifying that because Olivia Pope did have an affair with the president on the show — But you bring up an interesting point. You mention how it's a stressful job? So a lot of people think that, oh, it's fun. You're around celebrities and you get to go to parties... Now, granted that can be a part of it too. But when you look at someone like Judy Smith, she had to handle things like the Monica Lewinsky scandal. She had to handle Michael Vick who got in trouble because of the whole dog fighting thing. And Paula Deen. I mean, we don't have to get into Paula Deen. We all know but... that said, it is a very high stressful job. So, for you taking that on...why do you think that that's something that you want to make a part of your life, that you're going to have to rescue people, potentially, salvage their relationships and their reputations. That's a big — like you said — responsibility. So what makes you passionate about taking that on as a career.

Jahylin McKee 00:13:09

You know, I honestly I think that's a great question and I felt like I was so connected to my calling or my "why" outside of it being stressful, when the Black lives matter movement happened last year and you know, we think about like I literally I was having a conversation my mom because my mom was born in the 60s. And you know, I was just asking her, I was like, how were you, like, I know you were a baby but you know, the people who were around you during that time — what were they doing? Like what was the impact people were making back during the Civil Rights Movement?

And she was like, you know, honestly, Jahylin, we looked up to people like Martin Luther King. We looked up to people like Malcolm X. We looked up to these notable figures who are praised today.

But that also kind of hit me like a ton of bricks because when I actually went out to protest last year in Atlanta, I'm from Atlanta. Not only were we protesting during another black lives matter

movement. We were protesting in a pandemic. But most importantly, like I wanted to be a contribution to history and the history textbooks and be responsible for controlling that narrative.

And so I was literally using my God-given talents to kind of help contribute in my way — best fit. So, you know, whereas some people may want to just donate. Some people want to get out and protest. I've used my pen and I've used my words.

And so I've facilitated a black lives matter protest. I was giving out free and pro bono services to people to really kind of help get the narrative across. Like, I was amplifying the voices of lawyers and activists, you know, just really trying to share their stories and I feel like that would be like my contribution.

And I feel like if my words have the ability to amplify someone else's story to get the awareness that needs to be out there, so that way you can go into the textbooks and history is told right, then I feel like that's what makes it worth it. You know what I mean? Like, that's what makes stress, you know, the late nights early mornings. It helps me realize that it's bigger than just me, but I'm out-putting a positive resourceful moment in history.

Corey Andrew Powell 00:15:20

Thank you to everyone listening today. And don't forget you can find us everywhere you stream and download your favorite podcasts. We'll see you next week on Motivational Mondays