PACIFIC PORTRAITS

The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University

VOLUME 1

BEE TREE
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Pacific Portraits: The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University (Volume One)

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Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature [...] honey gatherers of the mind.
Friedrich Nietzsche

The “Bee Tree”, an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was “said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children.”
Automatically doors part, Yashica Island walks into Scott Hall with slow, methodical grace, traversing with purpose as she leads us toward the conference room. Literary magazines and stubby pencils cover the table; one of her strong hands pushes an old newspaper out of the way as she sits down.

“My hair looks cute, right?” Pacific’s Director of Student Academic Inclusion and Success grins, her teeth bright.

Conversation with Yashica is even and relaxed. Though she is initially soft-spoken, we find her quick to excite: thirty seconds into the interview, her hair and her personality are locked in a vicious battle over which will occupy more space in the room. When she laughs, she laughs with her whole body. “Have you guys seen that old movie *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*? I ain’t talking about the Bernie Mack and Ashton Kutcher one, either.”

She’s sociable and hip—welcome behaviors that are not often cultivated amongst staff. What Yashica may lack in orthodox methodology, however, she makes up for in compassion and all-around positive energy. Far from simple aspects of her personality, these traits are the tools that supplement her daily work as Director of the Tutoring and Learning Center and head of the Pacific Leadership Academy.

As a facilitator of mediation—both between students and the administration as well as their respective internal members—Yashica is responsible for large degrees of communication and the like. It comes as no surprise, then, that she is easy to talk to, incredibly forthcoming, and trustworthy. A typical day for her comprises of various meetings and conferences, in which she is responsible for communicating students’ needs to administrators through creative and amicable solutions. Preventing common miscommunications is another of her priorities she mentions, her hands
folded atop the desk. “The administration doesn’t always see the students’ needs as needs...that’s where I come in.”

It’s not a job she can leave at the office at the end of the day, and a commute totaling three hours eats into her relaxation time, but Yashica couldn’t possibly be more suited to her role and the demands it places on her, both in the office and at home. She is genuinely concerned with her students’ well-being regardless of the time, be it an eight o’clock appointment or a post-dinner debate. This ethos is obvious through her quick correspondence—whether it is an individual struggling with writing concepts or a group of interviewers on a busy Wednesday—and, of course, the way she glows when she discusses the positive change involved in her work.

Yashica’s eyes widen and she leans forward at the mention of her cultural work—a voluntary extracurricular of hers. She is responsible for facilitating awareness and acceptance of diversity throughout campus, mentioning that one of her long-term goals is to work with a variety of cultural groups in the interest of giving them the visibility they deserve. Indeed, though Yashica has quite a few claims to fame—even if you forget about her hair for a minute—her revival of the Black Student Union (BSU) may be the most meaningful one to date.

On her own personal passions, her face lit up, smile forming across her face, as she utters the word: “food.” For Yashica, food is a way of bringing people together. “I value food. A good meal, the quality of meals, great restaurants. I love to travel to experience foods in other places; different ethnic dishes. I love to travel. I love to eat.” Her face brightens, her smile showing every one of her teeth. “You can tell, I keep on the weight,” she says, sporting a deep belly-laugh. There is little she values more than a hot, hearty, home-cooked meal, which she experiences every night when she sits down to eat with her six-year-old son, Jamear.

“My son gives me one-hundred hugs every single day when I get home from work,” she states, wrapping her arms around her own body. “I don’t mind a three hour commute, because I know that I’m doing this all for my son.” She loves to cook soul food. She favors chitlins and smothered oxtail, both foods I needed to google after her mention of them. Chitlins, or chitterlings, are the intestines of either a pig or a cow. They are cleaned, stewed, and sometimes fried. Oxtail on the other hand reminds me more of barbecued pork. When she doesn’t cook, her favorite take out is anything Asian and spicy. “I like my nose running when I eat!”

I imagine the two of them, Yashica and Jamear, sitting down at their dinner table, pots and pans over hot-pads, opening the lid of a pot revealing a steaming stew of chitlins, oxtails, and various vegetables. The comforting smell of stew would envelop the whole house. Jamear is a strong motivator for Yashica; it is her goal to give him, and others,
what she never had growing up. “I never was able to have the luxury of experiencing life to its fullest,” she starts. “As I get older, I’m able to be in a career that allows me to experience life in a way that I never have. I wanna share that.” Yashica’s dream is to get her son, as well as students, to find their passions regardless of expectations, to find happiness over the material life.

Bellies and hearts full, her love for food and culture is clearly projected into her work at Pacific University. Every year, the BSU puts on a home-cooked meal night, where people gather to eat the comfort food that they cook. Here, the BSU shares their experiences and outlook on life. Yashica creates a safe space where students can share how they feel, while also being respected by their peers and faculty. She uses her own childhood as a primary motivator to ensure that each student is their own agent— that they put themselves first, and feel respected. She leans into the table, hands up close to her face. “Never be afraid to live your passions,” she says, hands emphasizing each syllable. Yashica notes that heavy societal and familial expectations are passed down and projected onto children—the need to represent the family, and how that leads people to go down a poorly-suited career path. Yashica encourages everyone to live life for themselves and not for other people.

After our meeting, she sheds her jacket, revealing a classy black-and-white woven top. She sits down on a vintage, light-blue upholstered chair and laughs out the words, “so do I get a real photo-shoot now, or what?”