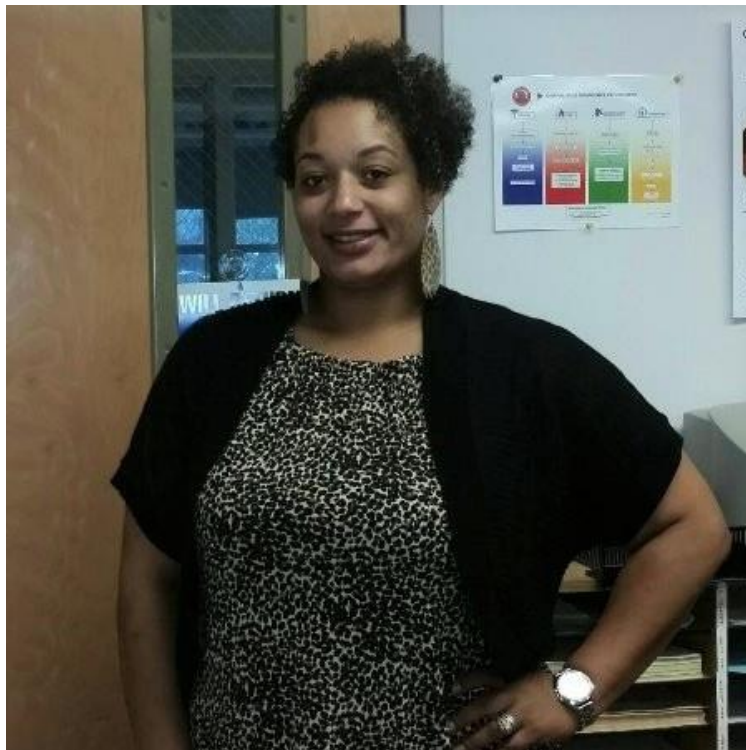


By Jennifer Gittings-Dalton

When I stopped by Student Life Coordinator Jamica Andrews' office at RACC on a wintry day in February, just before the Covid crisis hit, it was a hive of activity. Her desk was surrounded by students planning campus events, joking, unwinding, and all of them greeted me as I walked in. That was no accident. Jamica believes that "leadership is a process, not a result." Her calm and capable demeanor backs up the initiative of her student workers.

Under her leadership, they plan and manage a cultural calendar providing diverse and exciting programs for RACC students, gaining great job skills along the way. Jamica's mentoring and humor provide just the right spice to make life interesting in her office.

A 2008 honors graduate in Social Work at RACC, Jamica went to Albright College's Accelerated degree completion program, where she received a B.S.W. in 2012. She is now completing her M.S. in Higher Education. She was hired as the Administrative Assistant to RACC's STEM Division, where she worked for eight years, and then became an Enrollment Specialist in the Admission Office, working with dually-enrolled and other high school students who were earning early credit in college. After three years, she was promoted to her current position.



KEYS staff sat down with Jamica recently to ask her about her experiences as a former RACC student, a KEYS program graduate, and what led her to her current position.

"I love my job," she says. "It allows me to connect closer with students, share my story with them and see myself in others. My job is to remind them how far they've come, and remind them where they are going."

"I remember a time when I was very rough around the edges, and was attending the Gateway Program to gain work skills. Once, I didn't handle a conflict with my teacher very well. I thought she was talking down to me, and I was rebellious. But another teacher at the time told

me, **'Right procedure brings the right response.'** I never forgot that. When you handle things the right way, the wheels turn, things happen, and you don't have to waste energy." It's a lesson she now shares with students, and brings to everything she does.

But she didn't start that way. She is forthright:

"I am a domestic violence survivor. Back then, I was proud, I was strong, but I also knew that either I would kill my partner or he would kill me, and I couldn't do that to my kids, who were ages 3, 4 and 9 at the time." She took action. "It was humbling. I learned to be vulnerable

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enough to say the words: I need help. When I finally did call the transitional housing program at Beacon House, my caseworker moved heaven and earth to help me.”

As a young mother of three, it was risky getting her family away from her prior life with a violent partner. But she is grateful for the support and time to heal that Beacon offered her. “I knew I had three years to get to my next place, and the time limit helped to drive me. Programs like Beacon’s are essential. I needed time to change my thinking. I had counseling, group counseling, learned to set goals, and knew I needed to learn to trust some people again...it’s a shame that program isn’t here anymore.”

From Beacon she was referred to CareerLink classes on life skills assessment, which she found hard to accept. “I already had a lot of life skills. My mother was strong in my life, and gave me a good start even though I came up in the Projects. I was a good student in high school; I could write. I found the life skills classes almost insulting, but I had to go through the process.”

From CareerLink she went to career preparation classes at the former RACC PLUS Program’s Gateway Workshop, where she met Mary Turner, current Director of KEYS, who was then the Coordinator/Case Manager of PLUS. Mary and Jamica both smile at the memory.

“Jamica was the quintessential KEYS student!” Mary says. “She came with a lot of drive, edginess, and was full of potential, though she was skeptical of trusting people.” Mary helped her enroll in RACC’s credit classes and in KEYS, where she met Rebecca Paull, her Student Facilitator, who recognized her quick intelligence and courage, and knew the strength and risk it took for Jamica to get out of her abusive situation.

“Rebecca encouraged me to move the mountain!” Jamica remembers. “You know, students like me don’t need to be over-accommodated; just know that we can handle it when someone tells us the truth.” She laughs, “We don’t need the ‘woo-woo-woo! We’ve already gone through really tough things, and handled it.”

Mary agrees. “Sometimes we KEYS staff fight a perception that we are being “too nice” in what we do in this program. I think we empower, not enable, people through our support. It is about equity. I try to greet every student with the mindset that they have the possibility of becoming a Jamica.”

Rebecca and KEYS helped her through some academic starts and restarts, and to access financial support for daycare, get her driver’s license, and even to acquire a car.

Jamica asserts, “Rebecca was critical to my success. She would *not* let me fail. Often, I would drop by and “go off” in her office, and she would let me let off steam in my own way. I mean, I was rough around the edges back then! Then, she showed me how to say exactly what I had just said, but in “professional speak,” so I could be taken seriously by people at any level.” She smiles. “It was another experience with ‘Right procedure brings the right response.’ I still stand by that.”

“You know, sometimes I get emotional sitting across in a Student Services staff meeting from my colleagues Rebecca or Mary,” Jamica pauses. Then she leans forward. “KEYS... changed my life! I want to be a voice at the table for the student that was me. Students of color don’t have representation, often.”

“I want to be that face, that voice, that says, remind yourself to be who you are.”