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#### Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "Newsroom" (2019). *Newsroom*. 1778.  
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/newsroom/1778>

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# Georgia Southern first-generation student graduates magna cum laude

December 12, 2019



*Jaquez Miley*

When first-generation college student Jaquez Miley graduates magna cum laude in Georgia Southern University's Fall 2019 commencement ceremony in Savannah on Friday, 39 of his closest friends and family members will be there to cheer him on.

"I'm the first in my family," said Miley. "It's something that they're very proud of because they didn't get a chance at postsecondary education."

For Miley, it was important to him as a first-generation college student to take his studies seriously and to be involved on campus.

"I became a resident assistant my second semester," he says. "It helped me break out of my shell and get exposed to more people by being more open and outgoing."

Miley also served in the Office of Multicultural Affairs' Men of Vision and Excellence, which provides a multifaceted support system for African American males entering the university, and Collegiate 100 of Georgia, a coalition of students committed to upholding the principles of education, social and cultural awareness, community service and scholarship through organized events and programs.

Within the organizations he made lasting friendships that shaped his time on campus.

“Being able to have that support system here with people I can call family has been my best collegiate experience,” says Miley.

Miley will graduate with a degree in health sciences, with a health administration concentration and plans to take a semester off before pursuing a master’s in health administration at Georgia Southern in the fall.

After being recognized as magna cum laude, Miley’s biggest takeaway from his experience at Georgia Southern is that, “if you work hard, you can achieve anything.”

Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/R2 institution founded in 1906, offers 141 degree programs serving more than 26,000 students through nine colleges on three campuses in Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville and online instruction. A leader in higher education in southeast Georgia, the University provides a diverse student population with expert faculty, world-class scholarship and hands-on learning opportunities. Georgia Southern creates lifelong learners who serve as responsible scholars, leaders and stewards in their communities. Visit [GeorgiaSouthern.edu](http://GeorgiaSouthern.edu).

## [Georgia Southern graduate rediscovers passion for art in Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art](#)

December 12, 2019



Two-dimensional studio art major AJ Aremu developed an interest in art when she moved to Lawrenceville, Georgia, from Sweden at the age of 6, but it wasn't until she toured Georgia Southern University that she discovered that visual arts was a passion.

"I came for a campus visit and met the department chair of the art department," said Aremu. "He gave me a tour of the program. And I thought 'I can do this.' I applied and got accepted."

Born to Nigerian parents, growing up there was an expectation from Aremu's family that she would become a doctor, lawyer or engineer. Aremu began her collegiate journey at another university as a computer science major, yet when she transferred to Georgia Southern her love for art was reignited. Within two months on campus, Aremu made the switch to the visual art program with a focus on painting and printmaking.



"I see it as, you can sit in front of a computer or you can sit in front of a canvas," she said. We all work hard no matter what our major is."

Ameru's art has been featured in exhibitions and most recently, a gallery in New York.

After graduation, Aremu will enter into the Disney College Program and work at the park for seven months while she applies for a Master of Fine Arts program.

As for her parents, they couldn't be prouder of her accomplishments.

"My mother is ecstatic," she said. "I didn't know if she really liked my art until she went to see my senior show. I saw her face when she looked at my

art. I actually felt she was proud of me. It was the best moment of my life."

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Tags: [Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art](#)

# Georgia Southern student overcomes hurdles to complete her degree after 21 years

December 12, 2019



“I chose education to educate others,” stated Alexis N. Washington, who will proudly walk across the commencement stage this weekend — 21 years after she first began her studies on the Armstrong Campus — to earn a bachelor of liberal arts and a minor in sociology.

For Washington, the path to graduation was a rocky one, but determination and commitment to complete a goal she set for herself more than two decades ago pushed her forward.

Born and raised in Savannah, Washington matriculated at Armstrong State University in 1998 to be close to home. As a new student, she became interested in nursing and was on track to pursue that path, however, a traumatic experience derailed her plans. Unable to cope with the trauma, her grades plummeted, she dropped out of college and became self-employed.

“For the next 10 years, I focused solely on entrepreneurship but later began self-examinations of what success means to me,” said Washington. “It was at this point that I realized how important it is to finish everything that I’ve ever started.”

During those 10 years, she also suffered two strokes that affected her memory. Yet she didn’t let that deter her from pursuing an undergraduate degree and working with special education students in the school system, which inspired her to pursue a teaching career. Washington was recently accepted into Georgia Southern’s Master of Arts in Teaching program.

“I have decided to make my biggest obstacles minute in comparison to my new-found pursuit of happiness,” said Washington.

Today, she is fully recovered and grateful for online classes that allowed her the flexibility of time management, as she continues to operate a business. Named to the President’s List and the Dean’s List during her college career, Washington is thankful for her professors at Georgia Southern.

As part of an individual project, criminal justice professor Maxine Bryant, Ph.D., mentored Washington as she worked to petition the Georgia parole board in pursuit of an inmate’s successful release. Abnormal psychology professor Wendy Wolfe, Ph.D., helped her prepare to assist exceptional students diagnosed with learning disabilities and apply strategies and principles in everyday life as they pertain to the psyche of working with this population of students in a high school setting.

“I have met the most amazing professors including Dr. Justin Montemarano, who challenged me in biology, and Dr. Nalanda Roy, who demonstrated her passion for international studies and research.”

Washington also participated in the Southern Women Leadership program on campus to strengthen her presence as a woman in leadership.

As she continues into the education arena upon graduation, she looks forward to sharing the culmination of her passion for teaching, business acumen and life experience to help young people overcome obstacles and succeed.

“I plan to teach high school students in the area of special education or healthcare science,” she explained. “I will continue to operate my family business and hope to educate others in entrepreneurship. In the midst of exploring my passion to teach, I also plan to instill hope in others by using available platforms to share my story of perseverance and resilience.”

The full-circle moment is especially gratifying for Washington.

“I realized after spending over a decade in pursuit of making everyone else in my life happy, I was left unfulfilled,” she said. “So I decided to come back and finish what I started 21 years ago to make me happy and complete.”

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## **Georgia Southern graduate has 60 family members, friends coming to watch ‘biggest accomplishment’**

December 12, 2019



Family is at the forefront of Georgia Southern computer science major Tracy Bridges' life, and his upcoming commencement is no different. Bridges' family, all 60 of them, can't wait to see their graduate walk across the stage.

"Graduating is the biggest accomplishment I could achieve right now because it's something that I told my grandparents I would do every time I visited them, and I pushed myself to do this for them and for my family," Bridges said. "My mom's mother, who lived to be 99 years old, almost made it to see me walk across the stage, but she passed away earlier in the year. It fueled me even more to ensure that I make all of them proud because they made me into the man that I am today."

Bridges, who is from Macon, Georgia, has family spread across the country. His mother is the youngest of eight children, while his father is the youngest of 14, and he's found a close-knit friend group at Georgia Southern. His family and friends are important to him because they have provided support during his college career.

"To have so many people coming feels truly amazing because it lets me know that I have made amazing choices with the things that I've done in my life," Bridges said. "I feel all the love and respect that they have toward me, and I couldn't tell them thank you enough for the support."

Bridges has secured a job with Robins Air Force base in his hometown after graduation, but the first step of his post-commencement plan he jokes is to sleep for two days. The second step is spending time with friends and family, a lot of whom he met at Georgia Southern.

"I have friends that I don't truly remember how we met, but they are the closest thing to family that I have here," Bridges said. "I have friends who I don't know what their names are, but they will always have my back no matter what. I have friends who graduated before me, but they will come back to see me and catch up."

Bridges said Georgia Southern's family atmosphere and hospitality is perfect for someone who holds friends and family at such a high regard like he does.

"The people that I've met are truly amazing, and without Georgia Southern I would have never come into contact with them," Bridges said. "Georgia Southern introduced me to my loving and amazing girlfriend and for that, I am forever grateful. Without Georgia Southern my family could be very small, but now it's bigger than ever."

Tags: [College of Engineering and Computing](#), [Department of Computer Science](#), [GSGrad19](#)