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# Ashanté Hill, a determined young lady with drive

May 11, 2022



*Ashanté Hill*

Talk about the drive to succeed. Graduating in May with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and criminology, two cheerleading national championships and successful completion of her first year as an ROTC cadet, Atlanta native Ashanté Hill still wants to go farther.

"I have a lot of plans," said Hill. "Right now, I'm going through the enlistment process for the Army National Guard. While I'm waiting to start my basic training I'm going to be working at the Atlanta Braves Stadium with their

security team. Then I'll be at basic training and AIT (Advanced Individual Training) for roughly five or six months. Once I come back, I'll be beginning grad school, continuing with ROTC and working with the Braves during baseball season. Then, when I get my master's degree I'll be ready to commission as an Army officer.

Whew! Maybe she'll have a chance to take a deep breath after she accomplishes all of that.

Hill's drive to achieve her goals has always enabled her to overcome obstacles thrown in her path.

"I've pretty much been cheering my whole life," said Hill. "I knew I wanted to go to college to cheer but I didn't start cheering at Georgia Southern my freshman year because I tore my ACL and meniscus my senior year in high school. It was a lengthy rehab because I had to have two procedures to fix my knee. When I got to Georgia Southern, I did rehab at the RAC through their athletic trainers and worked with them that whole semester. Once I got cleared for athletics, I started getting involved with the cheer program, working on the necessary skills I needed to make the team. I guess it worked out in my favor."

Cheering with the team did work out in Hill's favor, helping earn the team the 2021 and 2022 national championships. (The 2020 championships were canceled due to COVID-19.) It was the seventh national championship for Georgia Southern's all-girl team at the National Cheerleaders Association competition.

But Hill had obstacles to overcome with cheerleading too.

“The 2020 season was cut short due to the pandemic,” said Hill. “It was a tough time and nationals were canceled. The next year we got to cheer in the stands for all sports and we won nationals. Then as we were preparing for nationals in 2022 our coach had to be out for a medical leave. Our assistant coaches and some former cheerleaders stepped in to help. It was difficult because we had to adjust to a very different coaching style. Everybody really had that hunger for the ring though. We pulled together and did what we had to do. And once we won it, the feeling was so amazing.”

You would think that with studying for her degree, interning with the Chatham County District Attorney’s Victim Witness Assistance Program one summer and cheerleading the rest of the time, Hill wouldn’t have time for anything else.

“I thought I needed more of a challenge and something with longevity,” said Hill. “I come from a family with a military background and felt that ROTC would give me more of a challenge. My older sister has been in ROTC and is getting ready to commission right now. So, I knew that it would help me pay for my master’s program. So even though ROTC is challenging, I actually love it.”

Hill gets up before dawn to start her day with ROTC.

“Getting up that early in the morning and going to PT and doing all these physical activities that your average person is not doing at 6:00 in the morning, gave me a sense of motivation,” said Hill. “This is what I signed up for. This is what I want to do. This is what I have to do. So I was able to push through it.”

When Hill first started her Georgia Southern career, she thought she wanted to be a lawyer. That changed as she began to explore other options available as a criminal justice and criminology major.

“I actually took an investigation class with Officer Spencer Riner,” said Hill. “And we were able to see the actual footage from some gruesome crimes committed in the surrounding area. It was a lot to take in but I thought this just might actually be something I might want to do. That was the class that really got me thinking I would, in a perfect world, start off in GBI and then work my way up to FBI.”

Hill’s upcoming job with the Atlanta Braves was facilitated through ROTC and might just help her with her GBI/FBI long-term plans.

“One of the reasons I took on the job with the Braves was because of networking,” said Hill. “The hiring manager told me the FBI is normally there, and that would be a good way to network while I am in grad school. So once I graduate I’ll already have those connections.”

Hill has already had substantial support and made connections while at Georgia Southern.

“Captain Kimbrel, and then talking to Sergeant Shade and Mr. Gamble, I just feel that all three of them really want the best for me,” said Hill. “And they’ll support me no matter what decision I end up making with military service.”

When asked where she gets her drive, Hill is quick to answer.

“I really think I get my drive from my parents. My mom’s biggest thing is ‘you’re going to have to work hard now to be set later or you’re going to just be getting by.’ And I remember coming out of high school, my dad was talking to me and my sister. He said, ‘either y’all are going to college or y’all are going to the Army.’ Well, lucky for him, we did both.”

Hill is not nearly finished meeting all her goals yet, but the future looks bright for the young woman with incredible drive who can push through obstacles.

“I just know who I am. I want to be successful in life. So in order to do that, you’ve got to go through some challenges. You’ve got to work hard. But I see myself being successful.”

We do too.

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## **Award-winning new Georgia Southern graduate lands dream job in Nation’s Capital**

May 11, 2022

Emma Franceschina’s childhood bedroom rarely had the same look twice.

Her passion for interior design started at a very young age when she would frequently rearrange her bedroom furniture.

“My mom is kind of the inspiration for that,” she said. “She’s always moving around our furniture in the house. Every time I go home, something’s different. The furniture is shifted around in the living room or in the kitchen or in the dining room or something.”



This week, she will walk across the stage to receive her diploma from Georgia Southern University with a degree in interior design. Afterward, she will be moving to Washington, D.C., to use her talents at a global interior design firm. She was pursuing jobs overseas, but said she's excited to be working for a firm near her hometown in Maryland.

Her mother is an artist and her father is an engineer. She attributes her passion to design a room with "function and form" to the freedom she was allowed in her upbringing.

"It wasn't until after high school when I was about to move to France and I visited my dad's colleagues who run an architectural firm in Washington, D.C.," she said, about her decision to pursue a path in design. "I talked with all the designers, architects, landscape architects and different people. That was what solidified that this is the kind of environment I want to be in for the rest of my life or my career."

That blended family background of artistic creativity and math is now leading to what she hopes will be a successful career.

A community college student in Maryland, Franceschina transferred to Georgia Southern in 2019. She was impressed with the impact the program was making. So, she transferred within the Academic Common Market, which is a multi-state network of universities allowing students to pay in-state tuition for a school outside state borders.

Not only did this transfer connect her with her field, but it also connected her to her family. It wasn't until after she applied for Georgia Southern when she discovered she had family who had attended the school as well decades ago.



“I have cousins that are from Georgia,” she said. “They met their spouses at Georgia Southern, got married and had kids. It was totally random, because I didn’t know that they went here before coming here.”

Upon arriving on campus, she found the faculty and staff to be thoroughly engaged in their students’ development. Franceschina said her instructors would stand in her corner when she faced opportunities she worried she was underqualified for.

“I would think, ‘I can’t apply for that yet because I don’t have two or three years of experience,’” she said. “But they would tell me, ‘No, you should apply for it. You are perfectly valid for that position and you should go for it. You will get there.’”

Interior Design program, Franceschina was making connections with industry leaders and gaining the attention of her professors and mentors with her skills and talent.

“Professors would bring people in to speak to us and tell us what the real world is like, and I actually got some jobs that way,” she said. “My second studio was in my second semester in the program. We had someone come and we did a little competition with our studio. My team ended up winning.”

This wouldn’t be the last award she would win for her work with her designs. Franceschina has a collection of awards from reputable organizations.

In the coming weeks, she will be traveling to NeoCon, an interior design conference in Chicago, to see a work pod she designed for a contest come to life.

“I’m getting to see something I’ve designed actually come to fruition at NeoCon, and I’m going to be able to touch it and walk into it and see it, which is going to be so cool,” she said. “Last year, I went to NeoCon by myself wandering the halls like this little itty bitty design student just like a little fly on the wall. And this year this is going to be a very different experience.”

The upcoming graduate notes the COVID-19 pandemic may be transforming her industry; changing the way people think about their living and working environments.

“It was a great step forward for people realizing the importance of interior design,” she said. “I think the industry will see an uptick in people seeking out designers who know what they’re doing, and who know the way around some issues: if you live in a smaller space and have that space for work versus play.”

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## **‘I don’t like quitting’: Double education major beats Hodgkin lymphoma to cross the commencement stage this week**

May 11, 2022



Kimberly Dawn, or “Kimmy” as her friends know her, started her journey at Georgia Southern University because it was a place of comfort. A native of Ellabell, Georgia, Dawn grew up only 25 miles from the Statesboro Campus. When her stepmother suddenly passed away during her senior year of high school, Dawn’s decision was final. She would stay close to family and attend the university she always cared for as an almost local.

It was during her first school observations that are required of Georgia Southern’s education students that Dawn met a paraprofessional who inspired her to pursue a dual certification degree in both elementary and special education.

“I watched as she addressed students in the classroom who were struggling with techniques I had never considered,” said Dawn. “Her experience in both general and special education classroom settings gave her different strategies to utilize with all students. That’s when I knew I wanted to have that knowledge and be able to do the same.”

A member of the Chi Omega sorority on campus, Dawn’s college experience was “amazing,” even though her junior year brought a new and difficult challenge. At 21 years old, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma, a type of cancer that develops in the lymphatic system.

“I found a lump in my neck,” she explained. “It didn’t go away, and even the doctor said it was probably nothing. Then everything moved really fast from there.”

After a biopsy on her birthday in February, Dawn was faced with a decision. Treatment would need to begin the Friday before spring break. Should she medically withdraw?

“I kept thinking I was halfway through the semester, and a secretary of an organization, and I don’t like quitting,” said Dawn.

With the support of her community, including her family, sorority, education cohort and professors, Dawn made it through the semester and today, proudly can say she is in remission from cancer and graduating this week.

“My professors were so flexible and supportive during treatment,” she explained. “In the dual certification program at Georgia Southern, you grow close to your cohort and your professors, as you spend four years with them and grow with them.”

Dawn has accepted an elementary teaching position in Columbus, Georgia, where she will relocate this summer.

“I am very excited to be in my own classroom and shaping the foundation of students’ knowledge,” she said. “I cannot imagine doing anything else.”

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# From high-stakes fashion to a special education classroom

May 11, 2022

*Former New York fashion merchandiser Celia Ayenesazan helps children with disabilities build confidence in the classroom*



*Celia Ayenesazan, middle, with peers at Louise Radloff Middle School, chose Georgia Southern's Master of Teaching program to become a certified teacher in special education.*

Long Island, New York, native Celia Ayenesazan graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology almost 30 years ago and spent more than two decades working for Federated Department Stores, Inc., one of America's largest operators of premier retail chains including Macy's and Bloomingdale's. But nothing brings her more joy than leading her own special education classroom.

This week, Ayenesazan walks across Georgia Southern University's commencement stage to earn a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), and a second chance at a fulfilling career.

At the height of her career, she sourced garments for Ann Taylor, Express and Liz Claiborne, but put her career on hold following the birth of her daughter to become a stay-at-home mom.

"I didn't work in an office setting for eight years," she explained. "I was away from the fast-paced fashion industry for a long time. I wasn't sure if my skill sets had become obsolete. A friend suggested that I apply for a job at the local preschool because she saw the level of engagement I had with young children. I was hesitant, but it was the best thing I ever did as it led to a new career."

In 2016, Ayenesazan and her family moved South to metro Atlanta to join her extended family where she secured a paraprofessional position at an elementary school.

In no time, Ayenesazan was encouraged by her peers and administrators to become certified and lead her own classroom. She chose Georgia Southern University's fully online MAT program to become a certified teacher in special education.

"I worked as a paraprofessional in a self-contained special education classroom and ever since then I have had a connection with students with disabilities," Ayenesazan said. "The reward of this work is immense and the impact can be seen almost every day."

Today, Ayenesazan is in her second year at Radloff Middle School in Duluth, Georgia, a Title I school with 98% minority enrollment and 83% economically disadvantaged students.

Since joining the school, she has been awarded multiple grants and completed several DonorsChoose projects, totaling more than \$55,000 in donations and grant funding to support new and innovative efforts to integrate students with disabilities into the general education population.

“Because I teach in a self-contained classroom [where students with similar disabilities are taught in one classroom], our students are often not together with the general education population,” she explained. “I want my students to gain confidence in their abilities and push them out of the nest, so to speak. Social support is so important in this process.”

That is why Ayenesazan has focused much of her grant seeking on efforts that allow students with disabilities to participate in hands-on, unique learning opportunities with students from the general population. Since Ayenesazan started at Radloff Middle, she has created an outdoor learning environment and gardening space, in addition to Tower Gardens, an aeroponic indoor growing system, to extend the learning experience by growing vegetables in the classroom, year-round. Students cultivate the vegetables and take them home to cook them. She started the first LEGO robotics team for students with disabilities that competed in a regional competition. Most recently, Ayenesazan received a \$20,000 grant to create a new multi-sensory room that will be complete with alternative lighting, fiber optics, vibrating chairs, bubble tubes, bean bag chairs, swings and fidgeting activities.

“The multi-sensory room can provide a comfortable space for students with disabilities, to engage with peers in the general education and special education settings,” said Ayenesazan. “It will offer an alternative to a classroom space for students to socialize and collaborate. The ultimate goal is to offer all students an inclusive learning environment.”

In the near future, Ayenesazan plans to start a sewing club so students can learn basic sewing skills and create costumes for the school’s drama performances. She also coordinated with several teachers to establish the school’s first gardening club. Another passion she has is to teach students to acknowledge the power of their voice advocacy skills.

“I enjoy thinking out of the box and finding innovative ways to empower all students,” said Ayenesazan. “When you love what you do, you dedicate your efforts to make a difference in the lives of all students.”

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# Georgia Southern graduate flourishes through change

May 11, 2022



*Eman Woods*

Accepting change is one of the greatest lessons that civil engineering graduate Eman Woods learned during his time at Georgia Southern University, and it is something he will carry with him as he begins to navigate his future.

As a child, Woods dreamed that he would become a veterinarian. That changed when he discovered that, though he loved learning about animals, he was not a fan of the medical side of the

job. In searching for a new dream, his family suggested that he try engineering.

“My parents were like ‘You have a mathematical mind. You should be an engineer,’” Woods said. “So that’s where I went. I wasn’t sure what branch of engineering I wanted to study, so I took an online quiz and civil engineering just seemed to click. I definitely have an aptitude for it, and I do have a future in the industry.”

As he began his studies, Woods’ expectations of a career in engineering changed.

“I initially thought it was just being able to do math, but it’s a lot more than that,” Woods said. “It’s weird because the field really has three major components. The first two are being able to do the work mathematically and being able to work with people in a business setting. Then there’s a written portion where you have to be able to understand what you’re doing at a level where you are able to communicate it to other people in a way that they can understand it too.”

He was able to work on these additional skills with the help of his fellow fraternity members. Raised in a military family, Woods’ childhood involved frequent moves. However, in high school, he discovered a love for music and it was this passion that led him to a new home at Georgia Southern.

“I was part of two fraternities, Kappa Kappa Psi, a national honorary band service fraternity, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia,” Woods said. “It was a weird transition going from one to another or doing both at the same time but, after finding a balance, it was like joining one giant family. The people in these organizations will sacrifice what they can to help and will stick their necks out for you, so it’s closer than a friend group. It’s a family.”



*Eman Woods representing Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia at Fall 2021 Student Org Fair*

His experience with this musical family led to many memorable moments during his college career, his favorite of which he experienced with the Southern Pride Marching Band during his freshman year in 2015.

“By far my favorite moment was the GoDaddy Bowl game we won in 2015,” Woods said. “It felt straight out of the movies. It was such a magical event. They flew the band out there and nobody thought our football team had it in us, but then we won. I remember thinking that this is it, this is what college is like. I loved it.”

Lasting seven years, Woods’ undergraduate experience was longer than anticipated. Over that time he worked multiple part-time jobs to help fund his education.

“It was difficult,” Woods said. “When it came to a priority list it was always academics and jobs. My schedule was full with meetings, work and class. I always had something going on, so there was never just a moment to breathe. It was a struggle, but I accepted that we don’t have to finish in the exact four years. Life happens. The important

thing is that you stick with it and you keep pushing.”

Woods will cross the stage earning his bachelor’s degree at Allen E. Paulson Stadium on May 11, after which his life will change again as he plans to move away from Georgia and search for a job in the engineering field.

“I’ve been on the East Coast of the United States most of my life,” Woods said. “I would like to see what it’s like on the other side of the country. Texas, California, even traveling outside the U.S. I would love to see Paris or Spain and just see how the world is. Things change more quickly than we give them credit for. Anything that can, will change and you just have to be ready to adapt on the fly. That’s the one big thing I learned was to always be ready for what comes next.”

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