

# SisterMentors

A Project of EduSeed

## Mentoring, Promoting Education, Transforming Communities

A Newsletter for Donors and Friends of SisterMentors

### Our College Graduates

Four more of the young women we helped send to college graduated this May. Cindy Ayala graduated with a major in New Media Arts and a minor in Game Design from George Mason University; Binta Bayoh graduated with a major in Counseling from the University of Virginia College at Wise; Sherifa Idris graduated with a major in Biology from the University of Virginia College at Wise; and Margie Obeng graduated with a major in Education and Public Policy and a minor in Spanish from Pennsylvania State University.



**Cindy Ayala, George Mason University, Class of 2015**

Cindy Ayala began SisterMentors when she was twelve years old and in seventh grade. She is the first in her family to graduate from college. Cindy's journey to her undergraduate degree began with two and a half years at Northern Virginia Community College and then she transferred to George Mason University.

Cindy's immediate goals are to find a job in animation and to support herself financially. Her younger sister, Diana, who began SisterMentors in fourth grade, graduated from high school in June and began attending Northern Virginia Community College. Like Cindy, Diana plans to transfer to a four year university to earn her Bachelor's degree.

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### 59 Women of Color Doctorates

We are close to 60 and we are shouting from the rooftops! This year, SisterMentors helped six more women to earn their doctorates and we are so proud of them.

Beth Diat  earned her doctorate in Education from Howard University. Sheherazade Jafari earned her doctorate in International Relations from American University. Melissa Lambert earned her doctorate in Education from George Washington University. Abigail Duchatelier-Jeudy earned her doctorate in Applied Child Development from Loyola University's Child Development program at the Erickson Institute, Camee Maddox earned her doctorate in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Florida and Sheri Sesay-Tuffour earned her doctorate in Organizational Leadership from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.

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## From the Executive Director

Dear Donors and Friends:

We will celebrate SisterMentors' twentieth anniversary in 2017 and we are very excited! This fall marks the beginning of our nineteenth year and during this time we have seen girls transition from elementary and middle school to college graduates. Also, during this time we have seen women earn their doctorates and become tenured university professors or pursue successful careers.

These have been remarkable years, but these women and girls could not have accomplished all this without you, our supporters. Their accomplishments are your accomplishments, too, and I sincerely thank you for your continued support of SisterMentors. Please know that you are helping to make a difference in the lives of the women and girls that we serve.

One of our major accomplishments this year was the SAT prep classes we offered to our juniors and seniors to help them be competitive for college admission. We hired a test preparation company and the instructor, Shuyinthia Farley-Hembry, was very knowledgeable and caring and established a strong bond with the girls. The girls had 36 hours of instruction. I was very impressed with their diligence and their strong desire to do well on the SAT test. Because we had administered and graded several tests --- including actual past SAT tests from the College Board --- our girls felt quite prepared and confident when they took the actual test in October. Our seniors are now in the midst of applying to college.

I am very proud of our four college graduates, all of whom started SisterMentors in middle school. Cindy Ayala, Binta Bayoh, Sherifa Idris and Margie Obeng graduated this year after four years of undergraduate study. Like our other college graduates, they all plan to continue their education. Azeb Legesse, who graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University last year, has submitted applications to graduate schools with the goal of starting next year. Ruhama Yared, who graduated from Goucher College in 2013, is preparing to apply to medical school.

We are beginning to see more of the girls who started with us in elementary school complete high school and go to college. Diana Ayala started SisterMentors in fourth grade, graduated from high school this past June, and is currently in college. We have known Diana almost all her life and we are proud of her accomplishments.



**SisterMentors Girl in Second Grade**

One of the things I am always grateful for is the wonderful women who are a part of SisterMentors. As you know, these women are doctoral candidates and are the mentors for the girls in our program. I am always awed by their commitment and caring for the girls in SisterMentors. And I am always inspired by the sacrifices they make to earn their doctorate. Many of these women are working full- or part-time, or are barely surviving on stipends so that they can have the time necessary to work on their degree. Often, they are pursuing their degrees without the understanding of family or friends who are not aware of what it takes to earn a doctorate.

I am very proud of our six doctorates this year: Beth Diaite, Abigail Duchatelier-Jeudy, Sheherazade Jafari, Melissa Lambert, Camee Maddox, and Sheri Sesay Tuffour. Almost all of these women have been in SisterMentors for years and have made substantial contributions to our program. We know that they will continue to do well.

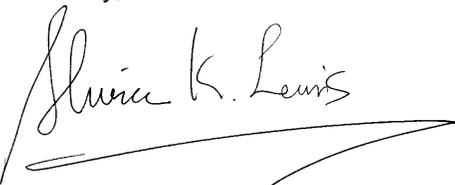
This year we continued to build community for SisterMentors through our inspiring one-hour Discover SisterMentors (DSM) sessions. These sessions are part of our community outreach efforts to spread the word about SisterMentors and are fueled by special volunteers who we call SisterMentors Ambassadors. This year we had 13 DSMs and 124 guests, bringing the total number of guests who have attended our DSMs over the past few years to over 500. These sessions are simply informational; they are not fundraisers. If you would like to serve as a SisterMentors Ambassador, please contact me.

As we approach SisterMentors' twentieth anniversary, I encourage all of you to consider joining our Dream Builders Society (DBS). This is a group of donors who have committed to contribute a minimum of \$1,000 a year (only \$83.33 a month) for five years to help sustain SisterMentors. Please contact me for further information.

I am humbled by your generosity and grateful for your support these past years. I kindly request that, as the year draws to a close, you put SisterMentors on your list of priorities for giving. We thank you for the huge role you play, through your donations, in helping the women and girls in SisterMentors pursue their dream of higher education. We simply cannot do this work without your support. Please continue to support us. You can send a check by mail, or make a donation online at [sistermentors.org](http://sistermentors.org) by clicking on the **DONATE** link.

As always, I encourage you to contact me for any reason. I am always delighted to hear from you. I can be reached at [director@sistermentors.org](mailto:director@sistermentors.org) or 202-778-6424. I look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,



Shireen K. Lewis, Ph.D.



**SisterMentors Young Women in High School**

## 59 Women of Color Doctorates

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**Sheherazade Jafari**

**Sheherazade Jafari** earned her doctorate in International Relations from American University on March 24, 2015. Her dissertation is titled, *Deconstructing Religious-Secular Divides: Women's Rights Advocacy in Muslim-Majority Societies*. Sheherazade's research focuses on how women's rights activists in Muslim-majority societies are responding to politicized religion and religious extremism, considering their own lived experiences, perspectives and responses to these global trends. Through an in-depth case study of Malaysia, along with a sample of interviews with activists in other regions, her research shows how women are working across religious-secular divides and inserting their own voices in the public discourse on religion in politics. While dominant approaches in both international relations and feminist scholarship continue to treat religion as dogmatic and oppressive, Sheherazade uses a feminist constructivist approach that acknowledges women's religious agency.

Born into an Iranian Muslim family in the United States, Sheherazade travelled with her family as a child between their rural Wisconsin hometown and post-revolutionary Iran. She experienced vastly different gender roles, and the prejudices of each location toward the other. Her grandmother's Islam which gave her strength, dignity and purpose, lived simultaneously with the Islam of Iran's new regime that restricted many of her grandmother's rights almost overnight, and the "backwards" and dangerously anti-Western Islam in the imaginary of her American community.

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**Camee Maddox**

**Camee Maddox** earned her doctorate in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Florida on June 29, 2015. Camee's dissertation is titled, *Drum, Dance, and the Defense of Cultural Citizenship: Bèlè's Rebirth in Contemporary Martinique*. Her dissertation draws upon ethnographic field research in the French Caribbean island of Martinique and analyzes the revival of the island's rich drum-dance heritage, *bèlè*. For the field of cultural anthropology, and particularly Caribbeanist anthropology, Camee's research provides new perspectives on Martinique's uneven relationships with France, the Caribbean, and the wider African diaspora.

Camee is currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where, among other things, she is working on submitting a book proposal based on her dissertation research. Next, she hopes to secure a full-time faculty position in the fields of Cultural Anthropology and/or Africana Studies.

**Abigail Duchatelier-Jeudy** earned her doctorate in Applied Child Development from Loyola University's Child Development program at the Erickson Institute on July 30, 2015. Her dissertation is titled, *Being and Becoming: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study of the Racial and Ethnic Socialization Processes of Fifteen Haitian Immigrants Living in The United States*.

Abigail's work is based on her own experiences with race and ethnicity as a Haitian living in the U.S. Her scholarship fills a gap in child development literature since there are no studies on the racial and ethnic socialization processes of Haitian immigrants living in the U.S. One of the questions that Abigail's research



**Melissa Lambert**

asks is: What are the explicit messages about race that Haitian immigrant mothers transmit to their children? Abigail's dissertation committee expressed pride in her work and said that her dissertation contributed to the field of child development.

**Melissa Lambert** earned her doctorate in Education from George Washington University on February 19, 2015. Melissa's dissertation is titled, *Generational Differences in the Workplace: The Perspectives of Three Generations on Career Mobility*. Melissa's dissertation helps to understand and describe the perspectives of Generation Y, Generation X and Baby Boomers on succession planning. Her research explores an important and underdeveloped area, using the lens of social identity theory and talent management principles. Melissa has served as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Maryland College Park, where she focused on career management skills. She plans to continue to teach. She currently works as a diversity and inclusion manager focused on generational differences and other human resource related issues.

**Sheri Sesay Tuffour** earned her doctorate in Organizational Leadership from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology on October 2, 2015. She is the first graduate of the school's Washington, D.C. campus' organizational leadership program. Her dissertation is titled, *The Impact of Social Identity on Leadership Development: A Phenomenological Study of African American Women in the Nonprofit Sector*. The purpose of her study is to understand how African American women perceive and experience social identity as an agent for leadership development. Sheri's study is centralized around ten middle-management African American



**Sheri Sesay Tuffour**

women from the nonprofit sector. Through the philosophical principles of Black feminist thought, social identity theory, and women's leadership development, the lived-experiences of the ten women are examined.

Sheri is the daughter of two immigrant parents who came to America from Sierra Leone, West Africa in search of opportunity. After completing college, Sheri began a professional career in the nonprofit sector and worked her way through the leadership ranks of the sector. She witnessed a growing number of African American women who struggled to advance through the

leadership pipeline. These observations led to her research interest.

**Beth Diaté** earned her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from Howard University on March 31, 2015. Her dissertation is titled, *Understanding Alternative Education Programs in Maryland and Their Implications for Students with Disabilities*. Beth's study argues that a student placed "at risk" for dropout has limited educational options once they have experienced failure in traditional schools and that a viable option may be an alternative education program. Her goal is to understand the current status of alternative programs, including special education, in Maryland and their implications for students with disabilities.

During the course of her dissertation writing, and as her daughter was leaving for college, Beth received custody of her nephew's three children. At the time, they were 2, 3 and 4 years old and had been in foster care for over a year. All were later found to have special needs. This set her pursuit of her doctorate back a few years but she successfully persevered. Beth was recently promoted to Instructional Specialist in the Department of Special Education in Prince George's County, Maryland. Her plans include an adjunct position at a university.

## Writing Retreats

As doctoral candidates with SisterMentors, we have had the opportunity to attend several writing retreats over the past few years. We have been to Yogaville in Buckingham, Virginia and at a private home in the mountains of West Virginia. We always look forward to these retreats because they provide us with the chance to disconnect from the outside world and dedicate some focused, quiet time to our dissertations. By far, the icing on the cake is the scenery and comfortable accommodations. At Yogaville, as a respite from our computer screens, we are able to look out onto the gorgeous mountain view by day and a star-filled sky by night. The home in West Virginia is just as memorable, with a view of the lake just outside the room where we write.

We approach every retreat with a set of goals that we want to accomplish. Our goals span from revising chapters or completing a set of analyses to completing a fellowship application or striving to get more sleep.

One of the other important aspects of the retreats is getting to develop stronger relationships with the other SisterMentors women. Having the ability to connect in this way strengthens our bonds and makes our network



so much stronger. We come from different universities and different programs of study, and it is good to learn more about each woman and share our various experiences of this unique journey. In essence, we build our community at these retreats and this sense of togetherness follows us as we return home, where we continue to meet for writing dates, mock dissertation defenses, and even fun activities to help deal with stress.

--- By Emilie Boone and Treda Grayson (pictured above). Emilie is a doctoral candidate in Art History and Treda is a doctoral candidate in Environmental Science and Public Policy.

## Social Skills and Leadership Workshop



“I learned that keeping in constant contact and maintaining good relationships will help personally and professionally,” said one of the girls. At SisterMentors, we know that developing the whole person is just as important as striving for academic success. Therefore, we offer workshops to help with personal development, including an annual social skills and leadership workshop at the Jefferson Hotel, located a few miles away from the White House.

“Call people. Just do it. Keep the relationship going,” said one of the girls when asked what she learned from the workshop. Part of the workshop was conducted by Ms. Fannie Allen of the prestigious Allen Protocol and Leadership Institute. While training the girls in the fine art of dining with a four-course meal, Ms. Allen talked to girls about friendships, communication skills and building professional relationships. She advised the girls that when they get someone’s business card they should ask what is the best way to keep in touch --- by phone, email or text. Ms. Allen also said that girls should research the person online to find out as much as possible about them and their work.

“I rate him a 9. I actually learned a lot,” said one of the girls when asked to rate the second instructor on a scale of 1 to 10. The second part of the workshop was training in public speaking by Raymond O. Caldwell, an actor and Professor of Theatre Arts at Howard University. The goals of the training were to introduce the girls to vocal techniques that would allow them to use their full voices, to make them aware of the importance of vocal health, to familiarize them with different vocal warm-ups that strengthen their voice, and to deepen their ability to give meaning to words and sounds.

The instructor first asked the girls to divide themselves into four groups based on how they felt about their voice. The voice variations included Raging Ocean, Peaceful River, Babbling Brook and Choppy Lake. The instructor told girls that the best voice is their natural voice. He pointed out the power of voice can be found in Lady Macbeth’s monologue when she stormed into her husband’s chamber. We can create characters from voice and the question is how to get a rich, lush voice as a speaking tool. Vocal warm ups can help. The instructor then took girls through several exercises to warm up their voice, including chewing gum in a certain way to warm up the jaw, and writing their name with the tip of their tongue.

The instructor said that societal pressure in the U.S. forces young women to pitch their voice up so they tend to speak at a high pitch when their voice is naturally in guttural lower notes. The voice can be projected very far away but not as a scream. When doing public speaking, he said, girls should think of throwing their voices far away. Language is not just words but an opportunity to create an orchestra and assign an instrument to every single sound we make.

Regarding the question of foreign accents, the instructor said that girls should never run away from their accents. The most important thing is clarity and articulation of words so people understand what is said even though they may not like the accent. At the end of the workshop, some of the girls were asked to give a brief talk at the podium and the instructor gave feedback on their voice, including on articulation and enunciation.

I have to tell you that SisterMentors has been with me every step of the way. I started SisterMentors when I was a little girl, nine years old, and in the fourth grade. And now I am 17 years old and in the twelfth grade. That makes almost 9 years I’ve been in this program. Overall, it surprises me how prepared I feel for all that is to come.

--- Khadija Tolba, 12th Grade

## Our Visit to Douglass Residential College and Rutgers University



**On Campus at Douglass**

“This is the best college visit ever,” said one of our eleventh graders who has been in SisterMentors since fourth grade and has visited thirteen colleges with the program. Our 5-day visit to Douglass Residential College and Rutgers University was one of the best college experiences SisterMentors young women have had, rivaling our visits to Princeton University in 2010 and Duke University in 2008. The young women were hosted by the Office of the Dean and the 5-day schedule was carefully planned and implemented by Keisha Dabrowski of Douglass’ Recruitment Office. The visit was made very special because of Ms. Dabrowski’s careful attention to detail and the Recruitment Office staff’s availability to answer questions and accompany the young women to scheduled events.

Douglass Residential College (Douglass), located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, was founded in 1918 as the New Jersey College for Women. The all-women’s college was born because Rutgers, founded in 1766, was all-male and did not accept women as students. Today, Douglass is the only all-women’s college in the United States at a flagship public research university. Through the strong support of proud alumnae, Douglass has always stood out as a place where young women learn to lead.

This was SisterMentors’ second visit to Douglass. In 2006, SisterMentors visited Douglass and was hosted by the Office of the Dean and the Associate Alumnae of Douglass College. Douglass always lays out the red carpet for SisterMentors since SisterMentors’ founder, Dr. Shireen Lewis, is a proud and active alumna of the college. The visit was jam-packed with activities, including attending classes, staying overnight in the residence

halls, sessions on admissions and financial aid, dialoguing with students including students from the Paul Robeson Center, touring the High Point Solutions Stadium, meeting with the Associate Alumnae of Douglass College and listening to lectures by Douglass alumna, Maureen Ausura and Bobbi Brown of Bobbi Brown Cosmetics.

The day of their arrival at the on-campus university in, the young women were greeted by a cheering crowd of Douglass staff and students as they were coming off the bus. Once they checked into the inn, they were whisked away to the President’s Welcome Reception where they were greeted by the President of Rutgers, Dr. Robert Barchi; the Dean of Douglass, Dr. Jacqueline Litt; the Vice President of Enrollment Management, Courtney McAnuff; and the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, Dr. Felicia McGinty.

After the reception, the young women enjoyed time with Douglass students playing games and winning prizes. They then went on a guided tour of the campus and spent the evening attending two Global Village Classes, at the Africana House and the Human Rights House, where they listened to guest speakers presenting on Muslim women in America, participation in die-ins to protest Ferguson and police brutality, and land rights for women abroad. SisterMentors young women asked questions about die-ins and whether they have any impact. They described some of their experiences in school after Ferguson.

“The students we shadowed were wonderful, amazing, inspirational,” said one of the young women. The highlight of the visit was the day the young women spent experiencing life as a Douglass student by attending classes with students, followed by sleeping in the residence halls. The students met the young women at the dining hall after breakfast and took them on the bus to classes on different campuses at Rutgers and then returned the young women to the dining hall that evening for dinner.

SisterMentors young women experienced classes on all of Rutgers’ campuses in the New Brunswick area, including Livingston and Busch. Some of the classes included General Biology II, Computer Science, Engineering, Abnormal Psychology, Women and Art, Ballet, Theatre, Biochemistry, Multivariable Calculus, General Chemistry for Engineers, Intro to Macroeconomics, Pharmacy and Principles of Health Education.

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The young women were matched with students who were taking classes similar to their interest. For example, since one of the young women wants to be a civil engineer, she was matched with a student who was majoring in engineering. The students also introduced the young women to other students and gave them a tour of the campus where their classes were held. If a student had classes only in the morning, the SisterMentors young woman continued the day attending classes with another student. They took notes during class and asked questions. One of the young women even took an impromptu quiz and submitted it to the professor.

“We got to listen to the lecture and get the feel for what college is like,” said one of the young women. “I loved the whole day and it was great to experience how it would be if I were to choose the Pharmacy route.”

## Presentations at Douglass

The young women attended two presentations at Douglass. The first was by Maureen Ausura, a Douglass alumna who is currently the Chief Human Resources Officer at Lowe’s Companies, Inc. This lecture was sponsored by the Associate Alumnae of Douglass College and was titled, “Confidence is the Key to Success in Business.” Ms. Ausura started by talking about her experience at Douglass. Her fondest memories included living in Corwin dormitory and sunbathing at Passion Puddle. She credited Douglass for both her personal and academic success.

Ms. Ausura said good leaders today emphasize teamwork and collaboration, which is where women outperform men in the workplace. She has been the only woman at all of the jobs she has ever had. Key advice for success that she passed along included learning to differentiate between things that are important and those that are distractions, making sure to cultivate a positive image on the job which includes always being on time for meetings, building a network of allies for support, and having mentors who can help with career advancement. She talked about women who feel like frauds or imposters because they do not have the confidence to believe in themselves.

“She was amazing and a down-to-earth person,” said one of the young women after attending the presentation by Bobbi Brown of Bobbi Brown Cosmetics. The girls were very excited to meet Bobbi Brown since they had either heard about her make-up or seen it in stores. Her presentation was accompanied by a slide show and traced her childhood growing up with her mother and



**12th Grader with Bobbi Brown**

grandmother in Chicago to her rise as a successful business woman who “turned a lipstick into a company.” She cited her mother and grandmother as role models, noting that her mother always wore makeup and her grandmother did not.

Bobbi Brown believes in makeup that is natural and enhances the skin. She says that “all women are pretty without makeup but with the right makeup can be pretty powerful.” She has worked with celebrities such as the Rolling Stones. At the end of her talk, Bobbi Brown outlined her life rules which include work hard but work smart, be nice, never stop learning, stay positive and be grateful. Some of the questions SisterMentors young women asked Bobbi Brown included whether she wears her own makeup, if she tests her products on animals as PETA claims, and what makes a woman beautiful.

SisterMentors young women had such a rich experience at Douglass that, on the last day, one of them expressed disappointment that they were unable to stay longer.

SisterMentors has helped my daughter Daba, a lot. She now believes more in herself and knows that she can achieve anything she sets her mind to. Her mentor, Lutheria, is phenomenal.

--- Suzanne Niang Thioune, Mother of 8th grader

## SAT Prep Classes



**Juniors and Seniors at a SAT Prep Class**

Beginning in August, juniors and seniors in SisterMentors began taking prep classes for the SAT test in October. Before the classes began, Dr. Lewis had a meeting with girls and parents to discuss what the classes would look like and what she expected from both parents and girls. For example, Dr. Lewis said that she expected all of us to show up for every class and she encouraged parents to carpool. The classes in August were three days a week including Saturdays. Once school started in September, we had classes only on Saturdays.

The classes were taught by Ms. Shuyinthia Farley-Hembry, who we affectionately called “Ms. Shuy,” and who is an instructor with Bell Curves, LLC. Ms. Shuy taught us different test taking strategies and skills based on math, reading and critical thinking. I really liked Ms. Shuy because she was very confident about what she was teaching us and she made it fun so that everybody could enjoy the classes and engage in the activities, but still be able to learn and improve our scores. Most importantly I appreciated that Ms. Shuy was invested in teaching us and really wanted us to understand the material. She was willing to help us outside of classes, including through email, text, Google Hangout and Twitter.

Every few weeks we took a mock SAT test that was proctored and scored like the real test. This was very helpful to us since it helped some of us get over the fear of the SAT and also tracked our progress. Before classes began, we took one of these tests which showed us the score we had before taking the classes and which we used to compare to scores after each mock test.

I talked to some of the other girls in SisterMentors who attended the SAT prep classes and here is what one of them had to say: “The SAT classes were amazing. I learned a lot of strategies on how to approach the problems. Ms. Shuy was fantastic, she found ways to make the classes fun.”

--- By Chipso Tucker, 12th grade

I have been with my mentee since I started SisterMentors five years ago. When I met her she did not have much academic confidence. I remember her first goal: ask for help when needed in school. Well, she has gone far beyond that point. She is now a senior and doing extremely well. I am so proud of all that she has accomplished. She recently said that because of me, she wants to work hard so that she can have a good life. Little does she know that because of her I worked hard to finish my degree.

--- Beth Diaite, Ed.D., 2015

## News from Our Young Women in College



**Gloria Aboagye**

### Third Year

#### **Gloria Aboagye, Old Dominion University**

I am majoring in Biology and minoring in Chemistry because I want to become a Pharmacist. I am taking all science classes in my third year. My second year was challenging because of my science classes. I took classes this summer in Anatomy I and II, Evolution, Ecology, Chemistry and Pre-calculus at a local community college. I lived off campus last year and will do so again this year. There are not enough dormitories on campus for everyone. I joined a club that helps students majoring in Pharmacy or who plan to go to medical school. The club helps students with standardized tests for graduate school. Last year, I got involved with the Student Government Association and I plan to get more involved this year. My main goal this year is to improve my grades. It is crunch time since I only have two more years before I graduate from college.

#### **Roxie Jairrels, Radford University**

This past Fall, I transferred to Radford University from Northern Virginia Community College. I'm now about to start my penultimate year at Radford to complete my Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA) with a Studio Arts concentration in Photography. Unlike many of the other mentored students you've learned of through SisterMentors, I've been attending college since my high school graduation in 2007, not for lack of trying to finish. I've just had a hard time nailing down what I'm good at for a career. However, every year since then, I've had the utmost support in my endeavors from my family and this wonderful network of mentors. When I first transferred, I was in the Bachelor of



**Jessye Jairrels**

Science program but was approached by one of my art professors on how a BFA would be more beneficial. Unfortunately, it requires an extra year of schooling.

I tossed the idea back and forth with my mom, who mentioned it to Dr. Lewis and received the final push to assure me I should do so. To say the least, I'm excited for my next two years building a portfolio and finishing out my "professional student" career.

#### **Ledia Samuel, Virginia State University**

I transferred to Virginia State University because they have better business classes, which is my major. I am minoring in finance. They also have more networking and internships for their students. I need more credits so I will graduate in December 2016. My classes this year include Accounting, Business Statistics and Economics. I just received a paid internship doing finances for a retirement home. I am thinking about doing an MBA, but must first pay off school loans.

### Second Year

#### **Jessye Jairrels, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts**

My first year of college was fun, exciting, and stressful. Besides learning new skills in my classes, I've learned more about myself and have grown as a person. I've met so many wonderful people and made a wide variety of friends from different majors and backgrounds. I am currently studying at VCU's School of the Arts, where next year I will decide whether to major in animation or illustration. My favorite class last year was my communi-



**Shi-Anne Campbell**



**Helen Viera**

cation arts class, which was a one credit overview and introduction to the illustration department. The professor of the class was a seasoned professional in the movie industry who graciously gave us insight and advice from his own experience on how to navigate the professional art world and become confident in our own skills.

One of the less fortunate things I learned in my first year was how much I had underestimated the demand college would have on me and the sacrifices I'd need to make if I wanted to reach my goals. This entailed learning to prioritize study and work time, over friends and my individual free time. Luckily, I've gotten better at this skill and am itching to try harder my second year at VCU!

**Amal Mint Didi, Northern Virginia Community College**

I didn't do very well my first semester but I did better my second semester. I took classes at both Northern Virginia Community College campuses --- Alexandria and Annandale. I plan to work hard this year to bring my GPA up because I want to transfer to Virginia Tech where I plan to either double major or have a major and minor in Civil Engineering and Architecture.

First Year

**Shi-Anne Campbell, North Carolina A&T State University**

My first semester in college has been such a learning experience for me. Everything in college, including softball, is a lot different from high school. The transition is very overwhelming because I am finally realizing how to be an adult and how to take responsibility for myself.

I have learned to become more independent. I have really been focused on time management with classes, eating, softball practice and ending my night with study hall. Right now I am taking 6 classes: History of Gospel Music, Personal Health, English 100, Family and Consumer Sciences, U.S. History from 1492-1877 and Math 101. My grades so far are As and Bs. I like all of my professors, but I had to adjust to each of their different teaching styles. Softball is going great. My team and I have really bonded and gotten close since the first time we met. I enjoy being around every one of the girls because we all bring something different to the team. So far, I love being at this college. I love the rich history about my college and how there is so much going on that there is no way you cannot be involved. I take pride in my HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) by showing my school appreciation and doing what I need to do to succeed.

**Helen Viera, Northern Virginia Community College**

College is much different from high school. I found that I need more self discipline. I have a lot more free time but that can work both ways if you do not discipline yourself. A lot more is required in classes than was required in high school. College is much more fast paced and is teaching me to manage my time better. I have a detailed schedule that is labelled and color-coded and includes the hours I work at my job and my time to sleep. I spend all my free time studying. My classes this year include Math (to get caught up), English, Psychology and a class that teaches public speaking skills like our public speaking workshops at SisterMentors.



## JUST ASKING

INTERVIEW BY NEELY TUCKER

# Shireen Lewis, founder, SisterMentors program

*Shireen Lewis, 55, is founder of SisterMentors, which aims to mentor girls from their early academic years through college graduation and help women of color to earn doctorates. The program has helped 26 women to go to college and 56 to earn doctorates. A native of Trinidad and Tobago, Lewis immigrated to the States after high school. She earned her doctorate in French literature from Duke University and her law degree from the University of Virginia.*

**I just found out that Billy Ocean is from your home town, Fyzabad. Inquiring minds want to know: Are you, in fact, the “Caribbean Queen”?**

I love Billy’s music! I have to say I don’t know who he was thinking about when he wrote that song, honey, but I don’t think he was talking about me.

**Nicki Minaj, Heather Headley, the list of Trinidadians is ...**

We are *everywhere*.

**What did your parents do?**

My father, he started out being a carpenter, then he worked on an oil rig. Texaco, that was the major company where we lived. Later, he was a policeman for Texaco. My mother was better educated — she had a high-school degree — but she was a homemaker. It was always clear that we were coming here for university.

**You have a professional interest in literature. V.S. Naipaul is from Trinidad. “Miguel Street,” “A House for Mr. Biswas” — were these big works for you?**

Naipaul is an enigma for Trinidadians. He loves Trinidad and hates Trinidad. I grew up



reading a lot of Charles Dickens — you know, the British colonial experience. I gobbled up all of his books in high school, then transitioned to books in other languages, often in French. Balzac, Simone de Beauvoir and many from the Enlightenment period. Then literature from Léopold Senghor from Senegal, Paulette Nardal from Martinique. ... I wound up feeling closer to Francophone writers talking about the black colonial experience than I did to Dickens.

**How did SisterMentors come about?**

When I was working on my dissertation at Duke, I relocated here, since I had a lot of friends locally. I was working on a very difficult chapter and I thought, “Why am I doing this in isolation?” This was the fall of 1997. I had grown up in Pepper Village, Fyzabad. Community was the thing. One of my fondest memories was when people would help build each other’s homes. So there was a bookstore here then, Sisterspace, and I volunteered there, so I asked them about getting women of color together, women who were working on their doctorates.

**New Yorkers tend to think they’re the epicenter of the United States and that the rest of us are just hicks. Nigerians think the same of themselves in Africa. Who are the New Yorkers of the Caribbean?**

I would say Trinidad and Jamaica. We both think we’re just *it*. I remember growing up, even having never left the island, and all of us saying, “Oh, those small islands, St. Vincent” and so on. Then I got to the United States and said, “Wait a minute — we are *all* small islands.” ■

## Thank You Very Much!

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Thanks to those donors who are in our Dream Builders Society with pledges of at least \$5,000 over five years: Esperanza Anderson and Cassandra Burton, Fanta Aw, Anonymous (2), Elizabeth Boris, Diane and Lyle Breneman, Pamela Bundy, Beverly J. Burke, Zofia Burr, John Chilton, Montana Cole, Susan Creane, Gia Cromer, Susan Fox, Tracy Gary, Carolyn Graham, Treda and Byron Grayson, Carroll Green, Carolyn Gullatt, Edward Hayes III, Tom Jesulaitis and Barrie Seidman, Edna Kallon, Cheryl LaRoche, Judi Moore Latta, Shireen K. Lewis, Laree Martin, J and Erin McCray, Alfred McGugin, Kris Miller, Helena O. Mishoe, Tiffany and Kyle Moore, Claudia Morris, Deborah K. S. Nichols, Deborah Gullatt Peterson, Winifred V. Quinn, Sherry Quirk, Keelin Quirk and Norma Scogin, Mark Seifert and Jeffrey Dygert, Christopher Shirley, Philip and Joan Stewart, Tacy Cook Telego, Yonette Thomas, Jenice View, and Lina and James Woods.

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Very special thanks to Nancy Bryant, Professor Linda Orr, Gregory and Anna O. Brown, Aisha T. Liferidge and Elizabeth Geisie for their generosity.

Special thanks to Emie Lomba for her service.

Our condolences to the family of Monica Wells Kisura, Ph.D., who passed away in October 2015. Monica was one of the women who helped found SisterMentors.

And, as always, thanks to the women and girls of SisterMentors for their fortitude and grace.



**SisterMentors Girl in Elementary School**



**Binta Bayoh and Sherifa Idris, University of Virginia College at Wise, Class of 2015**

Binta Bayoh majored in Counseling and plans to earn a doctorate in Counseling. She will apply to graduate school next fall and is considering schools in Maryland and Georgia. She will volunteer this Spring to get experience in the field. Her last year at UVA-Wise was challenging, especially because of bad wintry weather. This summer Binta worked with a program at Wise, to help families who were forced out of their trailer homes because of heavy snowfall. The African Cultural Association, which she created with Sherifa Idris during their junior year at UVA-Wise, is very active on campus.

Sherifa Idris majored in Biology and plans to get a Master's degree in Public Health or become a Physician Assistant.

Margie Obeng majored in Political Science with a minor in Spanish and Public Policy. She describes her last year at Penn State as "filled with joy, laughter



**Margie Obeng, Pennsylvania State University, Class of 2015**

and tears, but a great triumph." Her journey to commencement was extremely stressful. Her main struggle was balancing her role in three organizations, including president of the Africana Student Association and volunteering and interning with Teach for America. Margie's campus was also in turmoil because of the national outcry against police brutality. Together with many other multicultural leaders, she organized and participated in demonstrations across campus in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and Ferguson. Attending a predominantly white university was always difficult for her, but it became even more so during this time. Her peers did not understand why she and others were demonstrating and they used social media to criticize demonstrators. She was encouraged, however, by support from the president of the university and professors who believed in student activism. Margie believes that all these experiences helped her to grow and think in new ways and cemented her commitment to be an advocate for her community.

## Update on SisterMentors Alumnae

- **Shona N. Jackson** is a tenured Professor at Wright State University and Texas A&M University. She has published *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean*. Shona earned her doctorate in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University in 2005.
- **Tisha Ellison Lewis** was selected as a 2015-2016 National Academy of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellow. Her work examines the digital literacy practices of African American fathers in Georgia and the impact on their children's education. Tisha is an Assistant Professor at Georgia State University. She earned her doctorate in Reading from the State University of New York, Albany in 2009.
- **Ruhama Yared** is preparing to apply to medical school. Ruhama received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Goucher College in 2013.
- **Azeb Legesse** has applied to graduate school to earn a doctorate in Pharmacology. Azeb received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2014.

## PLEASE SUPPORT SISTERMENTORS

I would like to support SisterMentors. My donation will help sustain the program so that it can continue mentoring women and girls of color in their pursuit of higher education.

**Please make your donation by December 31, 2015.**

**Choose this:**

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\_\_\_\_\_ \$500

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\_\_\_\_\_ I am making a donation online at [www.sistermentors.org](http://www.sistermentors.org) by clicking the **DONATE** link and following the instructions.

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**DREAM BUILDERS SOCIETY**

\_\_\_\_\_ In honor of SisterMentors' 20th Anniversary in 2017, I would like to become a member of the Dream Builders Society with an annual pledge of \$1,000 a year (or \$83.33 a month) for 5 years for a total of \$5,000.

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\_\_\_\_\_ I would like to make a yearly or monthly pledge of \_\_\_\_\_ a year/month for \_\_\_\_\_ years/ months for a total of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ in honor of SisterMentors' 20th Anniversary in 2017.

Please make your donation or make your first payment on your pledge by December 31, 2015. For donations by check, please use the enclosed envelope and make check payable to EduSeed and mail to:

EduSeed/SisterMentors  
901 K Street N.W., Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20001

**Please remember that your donation is tax deductible.**

## Who We Are

SisterMentors is a project of EduSeed, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. EduSeed's mission is to promote education among traditionally disadvantaged and underserved communities such as women and people of color. SisterMentors mentors girls of color from low income families starting in elementary and middle school and following them through high school and college graduation. The girls are mentored by women of color doctoral students who SisterMentors helps to complete their dissertations and earn their doctorates. The women and girls are African Americans, Latinas, Asian Americans and immigrants.

SisterMentors' goal is to help stop the high dropout rate of girls of color and increase the number of women of color doctorates. We believe that doctoral students and Ph.Ds of color are a powerful, yet untapped, source of inspiration, motivation and knowledge for children of color who are at risk of dropping out of school. We exist because girls of color are dropping out of school at an early age. Our message to girls is to stay in school, do well, and go to college. We also exist because statistics show that more than 50 percent of doctoral students drop out of their programs and the numbers are higher for women of color.

We have helped 29 young women to go to college, including to Duke, Goucher, Bates, Virginia Commonwealth University and Northern Virginia Community College, and 59 women to earn doctorates, including in Mathematics, Science and Economics.

## EduSeed's Board of Directors

We thank Yonette Thomas for her service. EduSeed's current board members are the following:

Montina M. Cole

Thomas Jesulaitis

Kenda Kittrell Chavis

Shireen K. Lewis

Kris Miller

Marianne Tshihamba

For more information on EduSeed's Board of Directors, please visit [www.sistermentors.org](http://www.sistermentors.org).

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