

JSU senior competing in national pageant plans to use her platform to empower, uplift

JANS – Jackson State University senior Jaelah Wright-Keely was recently named Miss Black Mississippi US Ambassador by the Miss Black US Ambassador Scholarship Organization.

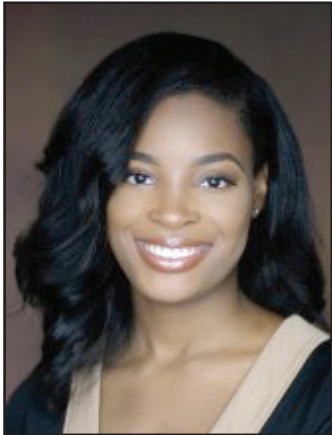
“I was super excited. Honestly, the feeling was indescribable. I didn’t think I would receive the title,” Keely said upon learning the news.

Next summer, she will travel to Atlanta to compete among 53 other “Miss State Ambassadors” all vying for an opportunity to take home the national title.

Because Mississippi does not have a state director for the

pageant, Keely was selected through an application process.

According to a press release, the Miss Black US Ambassador



Jaelah Wright-Keely (Photo: Charles A. Smith/JSU)

and Miss Black Teen US Ambassador Scholarship Pageant LLC, in partnership with the GE Institute Foundation Inc., exists to give a once in a lifetime opportunity for young African-American women to serve as an ambassador of change and to encourage, empower and enlighten communities, states and nations.

“During my reign as Miss Black Mississippi US Ambassador, I will be hosting community events geared toward my platform Route 365 which stands for rejuvenating opportunities to uplift, transcend and enhance lives 365 days a year,” Keely announced.

Not wanting to enter a pageant that solely focused on looking good, the senior said she desired to work with an organization that was community-centered and made a positive impact on the world.

The honor student further stated that she would like to improve the state of Mississippi by spotlighting the importance of black and environmental ownership.

“We need to truly understand the significance of keeping our money circulating in our communities. We should embrace our people and build each other up so that we can thrive,” she urged.

Keely described African Americans as brilliant people, but “we are more willing to spend our money elsewhere and support other people instead of our own.”

Eventually, the chemistry major would like to be a cosmetic chemist and start a fully-functional, research-driven cosmetic company that develops top-tier beauty products specifically for African American women.

“I’ve always had a creative side, but I also have an analytical side. Originally, I wanted to do something in fashion, but that didn’t pan out, so I started getting involved in makeup,

and that’s how I nurtured my creativity,” she said.

A native of St. Louis, Keely’s grandfather was born in the capital city. But, her first visit to the hospitality state stemmed from her interest in attending JSU. Since enrolling at the University, a strong bond has developed between her and her extended family.

Keely goes on to divulge that she has an equal passion for her hometown and Mississippi. Recalling her feelings when she stepped on the campus of the HBCU nearly four years ago, she said: “I immediately fell in love. It felt like a second home, like I was supposed to be here.”

Cunningham

worse. The only positive thing, albeit in a sad situation, was that she got the chance to see a good portion of her family at her cousin’s funeral.

From a wider perspective, the continuous curveballs and transitions was not the way Cunningham expected her life to be. After a while, she became immune to the changes as if they were second nature.

Through constant moments of change, it is always good to know there are people who still take time out of their lives to motivate others through their storms.

As the days went by, things were rough.

With each day, however, Cunningham began to notice the small blessings from God and the power of His will to manifest in her life as a young teenager.

“It was a blessing to have so many people care about my well-being,” Cunningham said. As I look back now, I was learning God from my own perspective and did not fully realize it at the time.”

“The obstacles that brought so much pain then were preparing me for the blessings that would be far greater in my latter years.”

Every day will not be filled with sunshine, but gray skies and floodwaters don’t last forever.

For Cunningham, the hurricane that forced her into new transitions pushed her faith to new heights, allowing her to embrace the woman she was becoming.

The young girl from the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, filled with many scars of defeat and uncertainty, began to kick down the doors of her past and step in to the path of her future.

After finishing middle school, Cunningham went to Murrah High School in Jackson, where she quickly began to make a name for herself. She became a member of the choir, where she sang in various competitions. As a sophomore, she participated on the homecoming court and competed and ranked in various statewide poetry and writing contests.

Had it not been for Cunningham’s faith and God’s ability to use her mom as vessel of hope for rise above her situation, Cunningham said she would not be the woman she is today.

“I never grew up with a silver spoon and having to restart from scratch made me grind harder for the things that I wanted to do,” Cunningham said. “My

mom showed me that anything was possible by raising my sister and me as a single mother but her faith during the storm taught me that God will allow us to experience hardships to bring us closer to Him and that no matter what we face in life, nothing is too hard for Him.”

As her faith continued to grow, Cunningham continued to soar along with her goals and aspirations. Traveling 90 miles south of Jackson to the small college town of Hattiesburg Mississippi, Cunningham continued her journey of defying the odds and becoming the woman she wanted to be.

As a student at the University of Southern Mississippi, she earned a political science degree in May 2014, became a member of the Iota Kappa of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., a member of Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society as well as a Gerald E. Mumford Scholar and Karl Wiesenburger Scholar.

After earning her Bachelor’s degree, she went to law school and earned a degree from Mississippi College (MC) in May 2017. At MC, she was a member of the Moot Court Board, Black Law Students Association, a quarterfinalist in the 1L Opening Statement and Frederick Douglas Moot Court Competition as well as a study

abroad participant to Berlin, Germany.

Over the last 12 years – from high school, to college to law school and – each phase brought a different set of circumstances, a different level of difficulty but an even stronger sense of faith.

Cunningham knew what it felt like to be at the very bottom, and she did not want to go back to that physical or mental state of mind. For her, things could only move in a positive direction and they did through the grace of God.

“The physical storm (the hurricane) prepared me for the mental storms I faced moving forward and what I sometimes deal with now on a daily basis,”

Cunningham said. “Prayer helped me to overcome things and to keep my priorities aligned for my life. Had I not let go of the troubles of the storm and not focused on living in a new home and new school, I would have not experienced the better seasons I began to experience then and now.”

Now, in 2017 and four months later after graduating from law school, Cunningham lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where she is a law clerk for The Granville Group LLC.

More importantly, she continues to fulfill her purpose in the eyes of God by walking by faith and not by sight through the storms of life.

“I lost a lot of material things that were not as valuable to God than my life,” Cunningham said. “The memories from the storm pushed me through my doubts, allowing me to see that God had a purpose behind my pain.”

While Cunningham may travel far and beyond throughout her life, she will never forget the city and the life-changing event that helped her become the woman she is today.

“New Orleans will always be my home, and I take pieces of the city with me, wherever I go. Without this experience, I would not have the true understanding of knowing that what is impossible to man, is possible with God.”

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