



Latasha Willis, Tougaloo College- c/o 1996, Mathematics



Name : Latasha Willis

Your HBCU : Tougaloo College

Graduation Year : 1996

Major : Mathematics

Minor : Computer Information Science

1. Where are you from? Who introduced you to HBCUs?*

I am from Jackson, Mississippi, and I grew up being very familiar with HBCUs thanks to the popularity of Jackson State University's marching band. HBCUs seemed pretty normal to me, and I didn't really see how important they were until my late teens.



Willis is a community outreach specialist for NAMI Mississippi. This picture is from the 2017 NAMIWalks in downtown Jackson, Mississippi.

2. Why did you choose an HBCU over a pwi?*

It was by chance. I initially considered Duke University or UAB until I participated in the Upward Bound program at Tougaloo College. When I scored a 25 on the ACT and was offered a full scholarship during my junior year in high school, I went for it. After skipping my senior year and moving onto campus as a 17-year-old in 1992, I learned then how important HBCUs were because that year, the Ayers case was a pretty big deal. I even participated in a couple of protests my freshman year because the thought of closing or merging schools like JSU, Alcorn and Valley seemed disrespectful to their legacy.

3. What is the story of your "experience" at Your HBCU given its heralded status as a stellar and prestigious institution?*

During my time at Tougaloo College, I took a required class for freshmen called Mission: Involvement that included mandatory attendance at weekly assemblies, reading "The Mis-Education of the Negro" by Carter G. Woodson, memorizing the alma mater (yes, we were tested on it), and open political debates in class. Taking that class made me more aware of the need for African-Americans to know our history and be proud of the African diaspora as a whole. I went on to participate in other activities such as being a Student Government Association member at-large, the secretary for the campus NAACP, and the president for the Nu Beta chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

4. "First time" experiences at your HBCU?*

My first-time experiences were in high school as an Upward Bound enrollee. I enjoyed a pre-

college experience at Tougaloo College that prepared me for when I became a full-fledged student. I took classes and went to the same cafeteria as the college students, and this helped me to learn to think like a college student and manage my time.

5. Who are the professors that have impacted your life in and out of the classroom? How did they do that?*

Sharron Streeter taught many of the computer science courses on campus, and seeing a black woman in such a position was a major influence on me. I also appreciated the support of the late Dr. Hendrik Angaud-Gaur, who was my advisor and loved to say in his thick accent, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" when he knew I was guessing at solving a calculus problem. Dr. Nimr Fahmy was also my advisor after Dr. Angaud-Gaur passing, and he pushed me when I wanted to just get by. I truly appreciate that.



Willis began Reason to Live Studios in 2005 with T-shirt designs and later offered freelance graphic design services through 2017. She is now setting up a website under the same moniker where she will offer e-commerce, consulting and online courses.

6. What adversities (hardships) have you overcome to become the strong person that you are?

I was dealing with some level of anxiety and depression throughout my life, but I was officially diagnosed in 1998. I've experienced everything from a suicide attempt in 2002 to being on disability from 2004-2009. This is why I am a mental health advocate working to destigmatize mental illness in the black community. I am also dealing with a recent diagnosis of Sjogren's syndrome, an autoimmune disease that attacks the body's moisture-producing glands causing dry eyes, dry mouth, joint pain, fatigue and more. (Venus Williams has this disease.) I am also working to raise awareness about this disease because it is more common than people realize.

7. Entrepreneur? Tell us about your business.

I am a graphic designer by trade, and I built on the skills I gained at Tougaloo College by earning an AS in graphic design from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh in 2012 and an MFA in media design from Full Sail University in 2017. I no longer freelance, although I still do contract work for a couple of nonprofits. Under Reason to Live Studios, I sold my design work on platforms such as Zazzle and Cafepress, and I am now working toward selling items on my own website that is under construction. I also own an online retail store called The Spinster's Shoppe (spinstershopp.co) where I sell home decor and gift items. I have operated the website since 2014 and am looking for more working capital so I can purchase products in bulk from local Mississippi wholesalers.